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Oral history interview with Santa Barraza, 2003 November 21-22

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Transcript

Preface

Recuerdos Orales: Interviews of the Latino Art Community in Texas

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Santa Barraza on November 21-22, 2003. The interview took place in Kingsville, Texas and was conducted by Cary Cordova for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Recuerdos Orales: Interviews of the Latino Art Community in Texas.

This transcript has been lightly edited. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

CARY CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova interviewing Santa Barraza at the artist's studio in Kingsville, Texas on Friday, November 21st, 2003 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disk number one.

And with that said, I'm just asking if Santa can tell us when and where she was born.

SANTA BARRAZA: Okay. I was born in Kingsville, Texas on April the 7th, 1951. And there is some controversy regarding my birth because I actually was born at home, and my mother had so many of us that I think at one point she sort of lost track, but I think that but I never really asked her, and she's already deceased. And I was born in my grandmother's house on Neddy [ph] Street. However, my birth certificate, when I went to get a passport, it said a different date. And I at one point had asked my mother about that and she said, well, because when I was baptized – which was, I guess, months later – they refused to baptize me under the given name that my mother had given me, so she had to – because they said that my name was sacrilegious because she named me Santa.

So my name was sacrilegious and the priest would not baptize me. So my mother had to change my name, and I think in the changing of the name there was confusion and they gave me another birthday, so there's April the 10th, 1951. Just recently I had to change it to April the 7th because I always celebrate on April the 7th, that's what I knew as my birthday, but then there was another date. But for your records I think it should be April the 7th, 1951. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: What do you think about that, about your name being sacrilegious?

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, I think it's terrible. I think it's another way of colonization, you know, how organized religion has actually done so much damage to indigenous populations all over the world.

MS. CORDOVA: And which grandmother is this?

MS. BARRAZA: This is my father's mother. Her name is Victoria Meza Barraza, or her name was. She's deceased.

MS. CORDOVA: And then you are the second child?

MS. BARRAZA: Right.

MS. CORDOVA: And you have a sister that's older?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes. The oldest one is Frances Barraza, and then myself and then – there were six of us. Well, actually there was seven but the youngest one passed away in the hospital after being alive for two days.

MS. CORDOVA: And so what are your other siblings' names?

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, there's – well, I'm the second one and then the third one is Joaquin. We call him Gordo because when he was a baby he was real heavy and he used to like wobble. He'd fall over, and so we call him Gordo. He's real thin but we call him Gordo. And then Eloy was the fourth one, and then Alicia, who is the youngest – which was the fifth one, and then Margarita, who is the sixth one.

MS. CORDOVA: And what is the age difference, or the span?

MS. BARRAZA: Between all the siblings? That's a good question. The difference between myself and my sister, the oldest one, is two years, and then myself, and then my brother is about another two years, and then my other brother is about another two years, and then there's a span I believe of about six years. But don't quote

me on this; I'm just speculating because I don't really know. I know Alicia was born I think in 1959, and then Margarita, the youngest, was born in 1951. And I believe Joaquin was born in 1954, and Frances was born in 1949. And I believe Eloy was born in 1956.

MS. CORDOVA: So what does it mean to be the second-oldest – [inaudible]?

MS. BARRAZA: It didn't really mean anything, you know. There were a lot of responsibilities but I think my sister, Frances – normally a first-born is the one that takes responsibilities, and actually – I don't know in your family, but after my mother passed away she sort of like totally took responsibility of all the siblings. So she always checks up on us to see how we're doing. She's a very motherly type, but I think because she's the oldest.

MS. CORDOVA: Yes, I have an impression she's been an influence on you.

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, but when we were growing up we weren't really that close. Everybody used to fight a lot. [Laughs.] But I think now, because we're mature and older, I think that we appreciate each other a lot more.

MS. CORDOVA: What qualities do you admire in her?

MS. BARRAZA: Frances? Well, I think you probably are aware that she – we're two years apart, and she was actually the first one in the family to leave and go to study in higher education, to leave the household. And I remember when I left, or when I tried to leave – and I did leave to go to the University of Texas at one point, as my father couldn't understand, because my father has a third-grade education and he couldn't understand why I had to leave. And what he told me was that, if you leave this house – he says, I don't understand why you have to leave; you should just get your education here in Kingsville, you don't need to go elsewhere. But I did have to go because I wanted to get a BFA and the university here did not have a BFA in art. They had, I believe, a BA. And so he felt, well, why do you have to do that; I don't understand why you need to do that. And that was because I wanted to get an MFA eventually – and you get a BFA then you get an MFA, but he didn't understand that. So he got really mad at me and he said, well, if you leave this house you're not welcome; you can't come back. So for a long time I didn't come back, you know.

But my sister Frances was the first one to leave, and she went to the University of Texas and studied pharmacy for a while. And so she – I remembered that at one point – and I think we were still in high school – my brother and I, she invited us to go to Austin, and I think we went on the bus, as I recall. We went to visit her. And it was right after I think that guy – what was his name? – that got up on the tower at the University of Texas and started shooting people, and one of her roommates was actually shot, you know, or injured, and so I remember that whole dilemma, and we were just these little high school kids who had gone on the bus to visit our sister in Austin, you know, so it was like this big adventure for us.

So she was the one that always sort of was sort of like setting new trends, you know, for us and I sort of admired that. And then she decided that she wanted to do something different and that she wanted to go into a cloister convent, so she joined an order and became a cloister nun – or she was a novice. But then when they found out that she had a heart murmur they actually helped – they were very nice – they helped, you know, so that she would have – because she only had a year to live, her heart murmur was so big, and so they said that – called my mother and they said that they – she needed to have this operation, and they actually helped the heart fund, so that my sister could have the open-heart surgery, which she did have in Austin. And then thereafter, they told my mother just to take her home because she was really of no use to them, because she was ill. So my mother brought her home.

But anyway – but then, she was well and she went to the University of Houston and got an education there, and I think she came here also. And so she switched careers and she felt that actually in a way it was better that she wasn't in the order because she felt that she could do more things in social work, which she did.

MS. CORDOVA: What kind of life did your father want for you?

MS. BARRAZA: I don't think my father – there's two dichotomies. my father and my mother, it's like the difference between night and day. My mother was very outgoing and my father was very reserved. And my father comes – well, they're both from working class parents, but my father grew up in Sarita, Texas, which is where Mifflin Kenedy and Petra Vela [Petra Vela de Vidal Kenedy] established their ranch, and so his grandfather was a worker there and he actually surveyed the land and divided the land, and then his father actually worked there. But he said at one point – I mean, there were vaqueros and at one point his grand – his father decided that he didn't like that type of lifestyle, that he wanted to travel and he wanted to do things differently, he wanted to work with his hands. He liked to grow things, he liked to harvest, so he became a sharecropper, and started working in different areas, first in Bishop and then I think they even went up to right around San Antonio and even went to Lubbock, and they worked in the fields.

And this is when he was a little boy and then a young man, and so consequently he didn't go to school because

they believed that – that they all needed to muster their resources and maintain the family, and so education wasn't that important to them. And just recently, now that I'm back living with my father, he says that he didn't understand how come his parents never taught him Spanish – or to write in Spanish, because he says they both knew Spanish, that they wrote it and they knew how to write and they knew how to speak Spanish. And he knows Spanish but he doesn't know how to write it. He can read it but he can't write it. And he says he didn't understand why his parents never taught him that. So he was a little bit perplexed.

But that's the way – that's the way he was brought up, and my mother, on the other hand, she also had a similar lifestyle but her mother died when my mother was, I think, two or three years old, so her father raised the family, which was a large family. I think there were seven or eight children. And so he raised them and they also were sharecroppers, and then eventually he – as you know, Kingsville was actually established because of the railroad, and so when the railroad came through Kingsville they moved to Kingsville, or he moved with his family. His wife died when she was like 29 years old, and so he was a widow and he moved to Kingsville with his family and started raising them and working for the railroad. He even worked for Dr. Pepper for a while and just did different things. But he always felt, because he always wanted to go to college or he always wanted to go and become a lawyer, but he said that the furthest place from – to get a law degree was San Antonio and he couldn't go there because he couldn't afford to do that.

So he always felt that maybe his daughters – because he had mainly daughters and two sons, my mother was the youngest. Well, he had a younger son but he was killed in the Korean War, and so he felt that my mother would be the one to go to college. So he actually sent my mother to college. My mother studied here at the university, and she was the first one in her family to finish high school.

So they were different backgrounds. Even though they were very similar, the mentality of them was quite different. You know, he believed that education was the way to accomplish something whereas my father's family felt that hard work was the way to do things, and working in the fields, and they incorporated that kind of thinking in their families, whereas my mother's side was completely different. And even to this day, like his younger brother, in my father's family, Santos, he lives in California and all his kids married when they were very young. They all started working when they were very young. And they're doing quite well – I mean, their salaries are better than mine – but they didn't go to college, none of them, you know, because they would also get their resources and work – and they're very family-oriented and they're very unified, and they go and visit the parents, you know, every day and they're very close.

So it just depends, you know, the situation, and they're doing very well.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you feel there was tension in terms of class between your parents?

MS. BARRAZA: They were from the same class. They started out as very poor and very humble people. And my mother did go to college but my mother was a schoolteacher when she met my father, and when they married he just had a third-grade education. And when she started having all of us, then he felt that she needed to stay home and take care of the kids, so she gave up her career. And so, consequently, when we were growing up we were very poor because he was just a – he was a dump truck driver. And then eventually my mother could see that he was very good with his hands. He was in World War I – he was in World War II, and he was released because he had flat feet and he was ill, and all kinds of problems. So he was only in the military I think for like nine months or 10 months, or maybe even 11 months, I don't remember.

But when he was released they had this training, you know, to revitalize or retrain them, and one of the things that he did was he actually was doing furniture, making furniture out of wood. They would make lanterns and they would make bookshelves and they would make furniture. And so my mother could see that he was very creative with his hands, and then she also could tell that he was very interested in vehicles. And my father even told me that – because when I would talk to him – because I remember that my grandfather on my mother's side had a Model T, and he says, oh, we got one too, and he says they bought it for like $600 brand new, or something like that, and then when he – when he starts talking about that car his face just lights up.

And I think – because he remembers it so clearly. Like, he remembers the fabric, like there was fabric in the windows, and there was, like, a craning bar to get the car started. And he talks about the beauty of the car and the beauty of the motor, and I think that's where he became interested in mechanics, because later on he did become a mechanic. But he didn't have any education, so what my mother would do is that she could tell that she was very interested in mechanics and he started fixing cars under trees. And so my mother would buy the manuals and she would read it in English and she would translate it to him in Spanish, and so then he would learn how to fix the cars.

MS. CORDOVA: That's an amazing story. So it was okay for her to work for him –

MS. BARRAZA: Right, and actually – yes, and actually once – he was working under the trees and then eventually, they bought a little house and they bought some property, so he built a little garage next to the

house and that's where he would fix his cars. He became a mechanic. And then eventually they rented another building somewhere in town on 14th street, and he rented it for many years because that's where I remember going there when I was little. And then when I was in high school, it didn't – they bought a place even further north on 14th street, and it was brand new. Mr. Solis, who is a local real estate person – and actually, my father was just telling me about that the other day, how Mr. Solis was one of the very first persons here in town who actually would buy a lot of land and he would actually build little houses and sell them to people or rent them, and he became sort of like this landlord here in Kingsville.

So he built this garage for my father and sold it to him. And so that's where his business was. And he would take my mother every day – and I remember going there too when we were little. After a while when we grew up we didn't want to go there anymore, but we would go and we would actually hang out there, and my mother would do all the invoicing and she would greet the customers and she would explain to them what my father was going to do to the vehicle, and she would do all the business transactions. She was like the secretary, the business manager, and my father would do the mechanics on the cars.

So they were like business partners, and the business was called B&C Garage. It's still called that way: Barraza and Contreras – because she was Contreras – Garage. So, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: So she got her name on the business.

MS. BARRAZA: Yeah, she got her name on the business. That's true.

MS. CORDOVA: What did your mother think of you wanting to be an artist?

MS. BARRAZA: I think at the very beginning she was kind of disturbed about it because she felt that I wasn't going to be able to make a living. She said, "Oh, you should be a schoolteacher or you should be a home economics teacher," because she knew I was very creative with my hands. I liked to sew a lot when I was growing up, and so I would make my dresses and I would make my blouses and pants, and so she told me, well, you should be like a home economics teacher; why don't you do that? And I didn't like that idea because I actually felt that – at first I wanted to be a scientist. I was interested in math and science and that's what I wanted to do; I wanted to study science, which I did – I started that career. And then I took a class and I started hearing Kingsville, and it was then called Texas A&I University. And I took classes for three semesters here. Well, I graduated in May of 1969 and then that summer I started school in the summer school, and then in May – in September I took, you know, academic classes for two semesters, and I went another summer.

Then I actually went another semester, an academic semester, and that's when I started taking art classes, and I took one art class in design by Ben Bailey, who is a founder of the art department, and he would travel a lot to Mexico. And so he had these beautiful slides of his trips to Mexico and the murals and pre-Columbian art, and so that's where I was first exposed to the culture of Mexico, because we didn't have it in high school. And in high school I took art classes but I didn't really take that many art classes. And in elementary school you would alternate – like one week you would have art, the next week you would have music, so we would alternate back and forth. So it really wasn't a good education, and in junior high they really didn't have it; it was mostly academic classes.

So it was actually in high school when I took some art classes. And I had a really good art teacher in high school – Joreen Newton was her name, and she was very –

MS. CORDOVA: What was her name?

MS. BARRAZA: Joreen Newton.

MS. CORDOVA: Joreen –

MS. BARRAZA: Newton. And she was a very good, very dedicated teacher, very focused, very concerned about her students. And even to this day – she's still alive and she comes to Kingsville and comes to see how I'm doing, and we just – we had – we did a banquet for Carmen and she came to Carmen's banquet, you know, because she was Carmen's teacher too, and José Rivera's too, and we all went to high school here. So but anyway –

MS. CORDOVA: So she's had a profound impact.

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, she has. Yes, yes. She was really wonderful and we all loved her. And so anyway, I took –

MS. CORDOVA: Why was she wonderful?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, she gave us art history classes. I remember that we had ceramics. We had a kiln and we had clay that we could work with, although I never really liked 3-D so I didn't really do any ceramics. I did mainly 2-D. And she was very open and very receptive, and she would even invite us to her home. Like, I remember her

son, who was our age, was going to be drafted, or he had been drafted, or he joined the military – this was during the Vietnam War – and I remember she gave him this big party at his home and invited us over to her house. And her husband was – he was a petroleum engineer, so they were very well to do, and here we are these little poor Mexican kids, and they would still invite us over. You know, there wasn't an issue with classism or anything. So I really admired that.

MS. CORDOVA: Was that rare around here?

MS. BARRAZA: Of course – [laughter] – very rare.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, I would imagine.

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, very rare. So she was different, so we liked that. And so – but getting back to college, in college I took that class with Ben Bailey and then I took another class with Maurice Schmidt, who was at that time an instructor of printmaking, and I loved printmaking. I was like – it was like another world to me, so I really loved it. And I had a little bit of it in high school with Mrs. Newton. We actually had done some linoleum cut prints, and with Maurice Schmidt we actually did etchings and dry point and engravings, and it was very exciting. So I thought, you know, I really should consider going into art.

So that's when I decided to go into art, but they didn't have a BFA, so that's when I decided to transfer to the University of Texas in Austin, and when I made that decision my father was very upset with me because he felt that, you need to stay here and you need to finish here; there's no need for you to go there. But I still went.

MS. CORDOVA: And why did you originally have an interest in math and science?

MS. BARRAZA: Actually I had – when I was in high school, my sister, Frances, was in the NFL math competitions and then I also was sort of drafted by the counselor, because I always did well in math and I was very interested in science. And I don't know if they did this when you were in high school, but they would actually gear like the students that were doing very well in academic in certain classes, so I was in that class. I always had like the hardest math teachers and the hardest English teachers. I was in there with, like, the smart kids, or the ones that they felt would excel.

And so I had, for example – and that was one of the things – I was just invited recently to my old high school, to go back. Actually they had a celebration for Day of the Dead and they invited me, and I told the students that I remember – I gave them a copy of my book and I said to the students, the high school students, that I remember that I took English with Mrs. Head, Edith Head – she was very hard – and when I took her class, she was very hard, very demanding, and I remember writing an article – it was a short story, I believe – and she didn't believe that I had written it, and so she told me that she wanted to see me after class.

So I went to see her after class and she told me that she was going to give me an F on my short story because I had a fragment but that she was going to give me an A on the content because it was very good, but she said, "Frankly, Miss Barraza, I don't believe you wrote it." I thought, why not? I mean, I had actually taken the wallpaper – there was wallpaper in our kitchen and it had these European names, Mrs. – it had some name, and I just took the name and the – the gist of the assignment was that we were supposed to write in the Dickens's style, Charles Dickens's style, so I had actually written in his style and I had taken all these names from the wall that were English names. It was like English wallpaper in my mother's house – in my parents' house. I had taken those names and I used it in the short story and she – and then I had my friend, Lea, who was Filipine, and she was in that class, she was a very fast typer so she typed it for me, and I didn't have a typewriter so I gave it to her. And she made an error and left the verb out, so it was a fragment, so she told me that I didn't – because I had a fragment I got an F.

So I told the students that I had once gotten an F with Mrs. Head on my paper and that I would like to give her a copy of my book. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: How old were you when that happened?

MS. BARRAZA: I was in high school, probably 16, 17. I was a senior in high school.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you respond?

MS. BARRAZA: I couldn't believe it. I told her, well, Lea typed it for me so she made a mistake, and I really didn't look at it that closely because we were against a deadline, so she typed it for me, I got it and I turned it in. And I said – and she says, well, I don't think you did it. And, what could I say? She was the authority symbol; there was nothing I could say. But I think I still got an A in the class. But the students that were in there was like Ann Stiles, who was the valedictorian of the class. There was other students in there that are now surgeons and doctors, you know, Ann Owens, who became a pediatrician. There was also – well, they were all – they became

professional people, so they were all in that class.

But I wasn't the only one that I think felt that way because I remember one time it was so hard – her requirements were so difficult that one time I think like half of the class did really bad, and one of the students – I think his name was Keith – when she came in to class, he confronted her and he stood up and he said, we have met and we have come to – of course I didn't meet; these were like the Anglo-Saxon students – we have come to the consensus that we want to let you know that we think that your test was very unfair, and we don't think it was right. We have talked to the counselor and we feel it's very unfair. And when he started saying that to her, she got really red and she started to blush, and she started shaking with anger and she said, "Young man, you get out of my class!" We were like, oh. She got up and she left the room, and she said, "Class is dismissed." And it was the beginning of the class.

MS. CORDOVA: So she was like that regardless of the background of the student.

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, yeah. She was very demanding on everybody, you know, regardless what your background was. She just wanted you to do well.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you ever feel stigmatized as a Mexican-American?

MS. BARRAZA: In her class?

MS. CORDOVA: Or just in your education, did that ever come up?

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, yes, yes, of course.

MS. CORDOVA: How did that happen; how did that emerge?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, that did happen, but however, I think – and the reason that I think that I was in those classes is because of my grades but also because I – at that time, President Johnson had instigated that, I think, youth employment program where you could work – where if you were from a poverty family you could work in the high school, and so what they did with the kids who were in – they put all the poor kids in this program, and I was one of them, and what they did is they gave us like jobs after school to do, or like during your study hour they would send you to a certain place to do things, after school. And so, what happened to me is that they actually assigned me to the counselor, Miss Troy, who was – she's deceased now; she died from cancer. But she was a math teacher, and I think that's where I started and became interested in math because of her and my sister. And she recognized that I liked my math, and so she put me in the NFL competition, although I don't think I ever competed, but I would go and I would do the slide rule.

And so she recognized certain talent in us in academics, and so she would put us in the good classes, because there were classes for students that didn't do too well, and they stigmatized them and said they're not college material, and they would put them in the lower classes. But I wasn't put in those classes because I did well. And then she knew my sister and my sister was very smart, and so they would put us in the good classes.

MS. CORDOVA: And your mother must have had something to do with that.

MS. BARRAZA: Yeah, because I remember when – in math – although I did well in math, it was hard, and I remember asking my – my mother would help us a lot, and I remember asking her – and this new math that we were doing, she didn't understand it, and so she would tell my sister, Frances, you help Santa; you know this, you've already been in it, so you sit down and help her. So she would help me. So even though my mother didn't know it or she didn't understand a problem, she would get my sister to help me. So, yeah, that had something to do with it.

But, yeah, we were stigmatized. I remember, even in elementary – I mean, I went to Harvey, which was mainly an Anglo-Saxon school –

MS. CORDOVA: Harvey?

MS. BARRAZA: Harvey Elementary School. H-A-R-V-E-Y. I remember that when Kennedy was going up for the presidency, and I think he was running against Nixon – I don't remember what years – we were in elementary school, and I remember the kids – it was like the Mexican kids against the white kids, and they – [laughs] – I remember that during P.E. we actually got together and put our hands like in a chain and we started running against each other and hitting each other because we were like for Kennedy and the white kids were for the Republican Party, you know, so it was something.

MS. CORDOVA: So you guys already had a sense of –

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: – the political spectrum and where you fell.

MS. BARRAZA: Well, not only that, it was the geographics. I mean, the school was here, and on this side of the playground and this side of the school was all the wealthy kids and the Anglo-Saxon kids, and on this side were all the Mexican kids in the colonias, and we lived on this side, and on the other side were the rich kids or the middle-class kids, the Anglo kids.

MS. CORDOVA: So not only was the neighborhood divided but the playground was divided?

MS. BARRAZA: Mm-hmm, right, and that was in elementary school. And then not only that, but in the classrooms, they would put all the Mexican kids together and all the white kids together, and the Mexican kids would get the Mexican teachers – not all the time, but I remember my first grade class, Mrs. Solazar was our elementary teacher, and she would teach us in Spanish and English because a lot of the kids didn't know English. Now, we knew English because my mother was a teacher, so we knew both, but because your name was Spanish they would still put you in with the Spanish kids, regardless of how you did.

But it was good because she understood us and she was very kindhearted and very understanding. So we learned a lot with her, but the same kids were in the same classroom all through the years until you finish elementary school. So we were already segregated when we even started school. And then we didn't even start first grade, we started zero.

Hi, Darin [Forehand and Rolando Reyna share a studio with Barraza].

We started in zero because they claimed that we were – we didn't know English, so since we didn't know English we had to start zero for a semester.

MS. CORDOVA: Now, was Spanish your first language?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, but I also knew English because my mother –

MS. CORDOVA: Or you learned them together at the same time.

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, we learned them together at the same time.

MS. CORDOVA: So when you went to school it wasn't a problem for you, or for any of your siblings?

MS. BARRAZA: No, huh-uh, none of them, except maybe the youngest one, Maggie, because by the time that she was in – she was the youngest one so there's a big age difference, and by the time she went to school, we were already in college, and so by the time she was in – when she was in elementary school, we were already in college, freshman or seniors, and at that time we moved from that neighborhood. And by the way, we lived on Kenedy Street and then the next street was King. So already, there's these not only historical barriers but physical demographics?

But anyway, we moved to a neighborhood which was not predominantly Mexican. We actually moved out of the city, which was Alsie Street, but today that's one of the best areas in the city, but we moved into an old house – we still live like in an old – my father still lives in his old house. It's sort of like a barracks that this man sold him. And so he bought like an acre of land with this old house, and it was like out in the country. But not the city grew and so the city is expanding and a lot of businesses are there.

But anyway, because she was raised in that area, my sister, Maggie, all of her friends were Anglo-Saxons because all the neighborhoods were little white kids. So she understood Spanish but she didn't feel comfortable speaking it. So she understood it, and you would ask her something in Spanish and she would respond to you in English.

MS. CORDOVA: Well, what prompted your father to move?

MS. BARRAZA: I don't know. I think my mother. They sold the house, and I really don't know why. I guess it's because we were growing and there were a lot of us, and the house that we lived in was very small; it was just two bedrooms, as I recall, and then this one had three bedrooms, so it was bigger. It had more land for us, to be in, and it was close to the high school and we're all in – we were all high school age at that time. We could walk to the high school. So I think demographics and – and it was – for us it was a new house at that time, whereas the other house was just a little shotgun barrel house that – actually my parents had bought this little shotgun house and then they eventually added other rooms to it.

MS. CORDOVA: So what was Kingsville like as a place to grow up?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, it was very – it was very different I think because during the summers we would go and pick

cotton, because there were no jobs. So when we were growing up, everybody would go and pick cotton. And actually, my father was telling me this – and I didn't know this – he said that when his father moved out of Sarita, that he moved into Bishop and he worked as a sharecropper for this man, and that he – the sharecropper needed a lot of cotton pickers because he was growing cotton. This whole area – you grow cotton in this area, and wheat and sorghum, and he needed people to pick cotton. So that my grandfather had a Model T vehicle, so he decided, this would be a good investment for me to actually bring people to work. So he actually became a contractor who would to and get people in town and bring them out to the cotton fields and they would pick the cotton, then he'd bring them back them back home, and then they would pay my grandfather and then he would pay the workers.

And so he started doing that, and he was one of the first ones to do that around here, where he became very industrious. And so we would go – I mean, his sons would go and then eventually when they married and had us, we would all go and pick cotton. I remember even then my grandfather was an old man and he would go with us to pick cotton. And we would all go and pick cotton out in the fields, and that's how we got money for the summer to buy clothes for September when school started. So that's what we would do; that was our summer job. There was a hard job, but it was fun too. It was a lot of fun because all the kids in the neighborhood would go, so it wasn't really like – you look at it and say, well, that's really hard; that's something that only the lower classes would do, but it was a lot of fun because the truck would come by and we'd all get on the truck.

And the teenagers – I was little – the teenagers would sing songs, lead them in lots of songs, and they would all – and they would meet their boyfriends there, and that's how my cousin met her husband, you know, yeah. So it was like a fun thing. And there were the teenagers making goo-goo eyes at the girls. So it was like this big community thing. So it was a lot of fun.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you have a favorite memory from that?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I remember my cousin who married – met her husband there, they would always – they would always say these things to us, and we always thought they were true. And her boyfriend, who became her husband, would tell me, remember – remember that man who was here yesterday with your cousin? And I'd say, you were with her. No, that was my twin brother. That was my twin brother. That wasn't me; I have a twin brother, so you say my twin brother, but today it's me. But tomorrow my twin brother is coming. So I never knew whether it was him or his twin brother, and it was all a lie; it was just him. [Laughter.] Stupid things like that.

And then my grandfather would take this little Mrs. Tucker's pail with his little taquitos, you know, and it would keep it hot because the sun was so intense. It was fun. It was hard work, but it was fun.

MS. CORDOVA: What did they pay you?

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, they pay you by the pound, so you had to pick the cotton then you would weigh it and then somebody would take notes as to how much pounds you would have. So at the end of the week we probably made like maybe $10 or something like that. But it was something, you know. It was something that – some spending money to buy supplies to go to school, or buy some fabric and make dresses, or whatever, buy a pair of shoes, or – things weren't that expensive at that time.

MS. CORDOVA: Where did you learn to sew?

MS. BARRAZA: My mother used to sew, but I didn't like the dresses that she made. You know, at first I would wear them all the time when I was little, but then you know how there's that age where you decide that, oh, I don't like that color, I don't like that design, and you have your own ideas. So I started having my own ideas, and so my mother said, well, why don't you take home economics in junior high? So I took a class in junior high, and it was with an instructor by the name of Turcotte, Miss Turcotte.

MS. CORDOVA: Turcotte?

MS. BARRAZA: Turcotte. And then later on I found out that she was related to the Turcottes who were the descendents of Miflin Kenedy. [Laughs.] But she taught me – and I think she was; I'm just speculating because of her name – but she taught me home economics and sewing, and we started out doing very simple things like little babushkas, which are like little triangle things you put on your hair, and then we do belts and other things, out of fabric, and then eventually we did blouses and dresses.

And it was fun, and I remember that at that time the Hemisfair Plaza had opened up in San Antonio, and we even took a field trip to the Hemisphere Plaza, and that was unusual. But she was very open, and we all went on a school bus, and we went to New Brownsville, and we went to the – they used to have – I don't know if it's still there – they had a fabric, Danube – Danube fabric or something, they had it there in New Brownsville, so we went to see it, you know, and some of them bought fabric. And then we went and had lunch at the park there and then we went to San Antonio to the Hemisphere Plaza, and then we came back. It was a lot of fun.

MS. CORDOVA: Quite a trip.

MS. BARRAZA: Yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: How old were you?

MS. BARRAZA: I was in junior high, in 9th grade, 8th grade, yes.

MS. CORDOVA: I thought you might have learned sewing from your grandmother, was it, or your –

MS. BARRAZA: She was dead.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, that's right.

MS. BARRAZA: She died when my mother was two.

MS. CORDOVA: She died. But you knew that she had been a seamstress and you had learned that story somewhere?

MS. BARRAZA: Later, not at that time. I didn't know anything at that time. It was later when I became interested in the family history.

MS. CORDOVA: When did you become interested?

MS. BARRAZA: I think I became interested when in college and high school, and I started writing papers for school; I would ask questions about the family. But then I really started using it – when I was in college I decided to become an art major because, I would look at books, art books, and we weren't reflected in those books. And so I – then I started looking at the photographs of Casasola, the photographs of Russell Lee, and I started looking at photography to actually found out, well, where do I fit in and how do I fit in? And then I started asking my family – and my mother was really good with history; my mother loved history. So she was very smart. She would remember a lot of things. She would even remember things about my father that my father didn't know. She knew things – because I guess she would converse with his mother, you know, and she knew a lot of things. Now that I'm living with my father, he actually tells me things that he remembers when he was a little boy that I never knew anything about.

And so, for example, my mother didn't have a mother because she was like two – I think my mother was two or three when her mother died, and so her father raised her. So she really wasn't a great cook because she didn't know how to cook. And her older sister, who's still alive, our Aunt Lupe, told me when I saw her one day that – because she's a great cook, and I couldn't believe how she was such a great cook, and my mother was not a very good cook, you know. And I shouldn't say that but it's true; she wasn't a very good cook, and later on I realized it was because she didn't have a mother to teach her. And I said, well, how did you become such a great cook? And she said, well, when I was growing up I was about 10 years old, my father – Espetación was my grandfather – took me to this lady who lived in the neighborhood, this white woman who was a great cook, and said, I would like for you to teach my daughter how to cook and sew, and you can have her work for you, and you can teach her and she'll help you at the house; she'll help you with whatever you need and you teach her how to cook and sew, so that she would go and work with this woman for I don't know how long – I guess afternoons or whatever, certain days – and this woman actually taught her how to cook. So she knew how to cook all these wonderful European dishes and Italian dishes, but she didn't know how to cook Mexican. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: That's very funny.

MS. BARRAZA: Yeah, it is funny.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you learn to cook? Are you a good cook?

MS. BARRAZA: No, I'm a terrible cook. [Laughter.] No, I'm terrible. I guess when I got married I was sort of like forced to cook, but I'm terrible. No, I'm not a good cook.

MS. CORDOVA: You got married pretty early. How old were you?

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, I think I was 21 or 22 when I got married.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you meet your husband?

MS. BARRAZA: In school. When I went to the University of Texas we met there, and we were both art students. And at first I really didn't like him – [laughs] – but I guess opposites attract. You know, he was very quiet. I guess in a way – now that I think about it, in a way he was somewhat similar to my father. My father is very quiet and

very reserved, you know. I was all into Chicano art and he was Euro-American, he was Irish-American, and I really wasn't interested in him. But he kept pestering me and kept after me, so I guess that's how it happened. And we were in classes together; we would study together in art history classes, so we'd study together. And he was from New Jersey, so he knew – and I didn't really have a very good art history background because I took art in high school. And we had art history but we didn't really have – we didn't concentrate on it; we concentrated mostly on studio, and so consequently I knew very little about art history. And he had a very good art education background, and so he would say, well – he would get together with me and say, well, in this class they're going to ask about Michelangelo, they're going to ask about Rubens, they're going to ask you – he would tell me like, these are the major artists and these are the ones you need to study, and, remember this painting. So he would outline it for me. And he helped me a lot with my art history classes.

MS. CORDOVA: And actually – really he was able to give you some insight into –

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, he did.

MS. CORDOVA: So, how about your classes with Ben Bailey?

MS. BARRAZA: They were design classes.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, those were strictly design classes?

MS. BARRAZA: Mm-hmm, yes. So we had design exercises. It wasn't really anything – but he – like I said, you know, he traveled a lot, and so I took two classes with him. I took one I think was like survey – or maybe it was design. I think it was survey, and then I took a design class. I don't really remember, it was so long ago, but I remember there was a design class. And I don't know if he taught us art history and design class or if that was another class, because he would show his slides in the class that I was in, and he would show us slides of Mexico, because he traveled a lot – he and his wife would travel to Mexico. And he was an architect, so he was very interested in the pyramids, he was very interested in pre-Columbian art because I guess the structure and the aesthetics and mathematics in it, so he was very interested in that.

MS. CORDOVA: So he would've been able to bring that to you –

MS. BARRAZA: The classroom, right.

MS. CORDOVA: – among many other things that you –

MS. BARRAZA: Right. But it was just one semester, you know, so it really – it really wasn't very extensive, but it was just enough to get me interested, and maybe this is something I should explore.

MS. CORDOVA: Can you talk a little bit about the influence of design on your painting, that whole experience as the graphic designer?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I studied design at the University of Texas, basic classes, but when I finished college, the only thing you can do, to make a living was actually graphic design or advertising art, or at that time we called it commercial art. So when I finished the University of Texas or finished my degree, there were opportunities in Austin that we don't find here, like for example there were graphic design positions because they had several publishing companies there. And I had gone to school with Nora González, and we had been in school together, and when she finished she got a job working for Steck-Vaughn Publishing Company.

MS. CORDOVA: Steck-Vaughn?

MS. BARRAZA: Steck-Vaughn – S-T-E-C-K V-A-U-G-H-N – in Austin, which I think is still going – it's still functioning. But she got a job there, and I didn't get a job right away because I actually got married then I had a daughter, and so I was like a mom at home. And actually, the person that actually got me involved in graphic design was Carmen Lomas Garza. I remember she called me one day – she was in Austin at that time and she was actually – she was a student at what is Lincoln University, which was what is Antioch Lincoln University. It was part of Antioch. And she was actually in graduate school, and she was getting ready to leave. She was going somewhere else, leaving the city. And she had been working; they had like a little publication I think or a little graphic design department at the university and she had been working there doing graphic design for them.

And I think she had – and they actually had set up some businesses in the community, and one of the businesses that they had set up was Glass Engraving Company – I think that's the name of it, I don't remember anymore. I think it was called Glass Engraving Company, which they set up with – they had set it up – they would get grants. See, what the – it was a graduate school. What is Lincoln University was a graduate school, and they had Chicano Studies graduate school, and they also had nursing and they also had business, and they had like different aspects.

And so, what some of the students would do is they would write grants to get money, and one of them was, I think, a small business grant where they actually had gotten this money and they had set up businesses in the community. And so one of those businesses was the Glass Engraving Company, and they had asked Carmen if she would work there, and Carmen was leaving town so she said no. At first I think she had expressed interest, but then she called me and she says, you know, I have a job for you. I said, Carmen, I have a baby. And then she says, oh, no, you can do this; you can get someone to help you with your baby; it can be part-time, you don't have to have – and I said, Carmen, I don't know anything about graphic design. She said, oh, I'll help you. It's real easy. You come and we'll go together.

And so she took me to this company, and here I go, and I got a neighbor to take care of my daughter – I think that's what I did – and I went and she told me, this is what you need to – I said, Carmen, I don't know how to do any of this; I don't know how to do lettering. She said, you don't have to worry about it, all you have to do is letterpress – just buy the letterpress and you put it in. And she was showing me – she said, I'll help you. So she helped me for a few days and then she said – and then they offered me the job and she says, take it; it's a good job.

And so I didn't know what to do, and I called my mother and my mother says, well, just bring Andrea over here to me. I'll take care of her until you get settled in. So that's what I did. I took my daughter to my mother and she helped me with her while she was a baby. I think she – I think Andrea was already almost one year old, you know, and so she – my mother kept her for a while until I got my first paycheck, and then I got a – in the complex, the apartment complex where we lived, there was a daycare, so then I – I enrolled her in the daycare, and so then I had someone to take care of her. And then of course my husband at that time was also working, so he would go to his job and I would go to my job.

And my parents were very helpful. They got us a used car so I could have a car to go to work. And actually I think, after I had finished my degree, they bought me a little – a brand new little car. It was a Rambler Gremlin – I don't know if you remember those Gremlins – and it was this horrible color; it was sort of like this phosphoric purple, you know, and that was my little car. And I was so proud of it. It was a little bright-colored car, but it was the new car that I had.

MS. CORDOVA: Was that your first job in being paid as an artist?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, and then after that I met a lot of people in that company because what they would do is they would do crystal, they would engrave on crystal, so I would do the drawings and the typography or the lettering, and then they would actually – they had this sound with – sound – they would actually engrave with sound waves. And so it was very interesting.

But I met a lot of people there and I met other people that would come to get businesses – they brought their business there and they had other businesses, and so eventually I was lured to the capital. They had a printmaking room there and one of the guys that worked there said, oh, we need a graphic designer; why don't you come and work? And I said, well, you know, I would like to go back – at that time I don't think I had finished my degree. I think I hadn't – I think I needed one class to finish my degree, and I said, I'd like to finish my degree. And he said, well, you can work part-time over here and go get your degree, or something. He was very accommodating, and so I said, well, okay, well maybe I can to that.

So that's what I did because my husband wanted me to work because we needed money in the house, so I got this job, like a contract where I would go and pick up the jobs and I could actually work there for a little bit and then go home and finish them at home and turn them in, and I would get paid. And then I could go to school. So that's what I did. I got this job that allowed me that flexibility and I went to school, and then sometimes I didn't have a babysitter for Andrea at that time and I would just take her with me. That was really a nightmare, you know? But it wasn't all the time. Just sometimes I would take her with me.

But anyway, so, then after that – I did get my degree, and then after that –

MS. CORDOVA: What year was that?

MS. BARRAZA: I think I got it in the summer of '75 – I went in the summer of '75 and got it.

MS. CORDOVA: And how long had you been working at the graphic place?

MS. BARRAZA: About a year I think, or maybe several months – maybe half a year.

MS. CORDOVA: Now, how did you meet Carmen Lomas Garza?

MS. BARRAZA: We went to high school together.

MS. CORDOVA: I mean, do you remember meeting her, or –

MS. BARRAZA: Yeah, I remember her. She was – she's a little bit older than I am because I think she was born in '48, but actually she graduated a year – a year before me. I understand that, because my sister graduated in '67 and I think Carmen graduated in '68 and I graduated in '69, but Carmen is actually older than my sister. But I don't know how that happened. I know that since we were like half a year behind, we actually went to summer school to get caught up. So maybe Carmen didn't go to summer school; I don't know. But we went like three summers to get caught up so we wouldn't be a semester behind, because we were a semester behind. So my sister did that, and then we all did that in the family.

MS. CORDOVA: You were a semester behind because of –

MS. BARRAZA: Because we were in zero. So we were in zero from September to December, then we would start low first, then in September we would be in high first. Then in January we would be in low second, so we were always like half a year behind. So when – I guess my mother – I don't know who, but my mother was very smart, and so you could take summer classes. You would pay $30 I think a summer and you could take a summer class or several courses and get credits, and then you would advance. So that's what we started doing. My sister did that and I did that, and we all did that so we would finish in time with what we were supposed to be – you know, a regular student.

MS. CORDOVA: So there's not much of a difference in high school. Were you friends?

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, she was a year in front of me, but Carmen was like a star, you know –

MS. CORDOVA: She was?

MS. BARRAZA: Yeah, everybody loved her work and she was very focused. She knows who she was and she's very determined. And so she was a star in the art department, when she was there, in high school and also here at the university.

MS. CORDOVA: Even in high school she was a star?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, she was. She was very methodical and very focused, and I think that what would happen is like if you really excelled in your craft, they would make you like the art editor of *Descant*, which is the literary magazine that we had in high school. So I was the art editor. And I remember I was the art editor when I was a senior; Carmen was the art editor when she was a senior, I think, and then I was the art editor when I was a senior, so they would just pass it down, like, to the best students or whatever, and so I remember her from that time. But she was a year ahead, so, you know, when you're a senior you don't mingle with the lower classes. [Laughs.]

But I remember her from just – and I didn't take that many art classes, but I think Carmen did take a lot of art classes, and I didn't take that many. So I never had her in an art class because she was already advanced. When I started taking art classes, Carmen probably already had four semesters of art, you know, so we were never in the same class, and she was older, so – not that much older, but we just never were in the same class. But I do – I do remember her more from college because when I went to college she was already, I think, a junior or a senior. She was getting ready to graduate, I believe. Yes, I think so – because I didn't take classes until I had – I was there like a third – my third semester, so by that time she already had probably two or three years, so she might have been a junior at that time when I was starting out in the art classes.

But she was the star of the art department. I remember that we used to have in the gallery – the gallery we went through they used to have "Happenings," and I remember they would put in these white sheets hanging from the ceiling and blue lights and black lights, and they turned out all the lights and this hippie music, and she would paint her face white, and she had these sheets and she would go with this music, and we were like, ooh, like we were so – we were so enamored by all of that, because it was all totally new for us. But she was a pro at it, you know, and she was involved with so many things, you know, with the exhibitions, organizing exhibitions. And José Rivera was there, too, and Amado Peña was there.

And so, when I was there, Amado Peña was a graduate student, Carmen was like a junior or a senior, and José Rivera was there too. I think José was a year older than Carmen. And so, they were all – all three guys were there, and César Martínez wasn't there, but then later on when I started taking art classes, he would hang around the art department. I think he had come back from the Vietnam War, and he liked Kingsville and he would come periodically. And Carlos Guerra was there, and José Angel Guttierrez was there too at the same time as a grad student. And there was a lot of activism and a lot of wonderful things going on. I remember Pedro Rodriguez was a professor there – he was the first Chicano professor that they had ever hired – and he was very active.

And I remember that we became involved with MAYO [Mexican American Youth Organization] – and Carlos Guerra actually founded it – a Mexican-American youth organization. And they would have protests, and I remember that we would go out in the community and we would work with the community. And Pedro – we had – there was a little house that we would go to, it was like an activist house. I don't know if it was for the Brown Berets or it was for Mayo. I don't remember, but I remember I'd go with some of the art students and we would do posters, like protest posters. And I remember there was this big article, it was a big scandal – actually, it came out in the school paper or even in the Kingsville Record, I remember, but it was this – you see on the top – there were two photographs on the front page, and one was President [James] Jernigan from the library relaxing in a big sofa, and then right below it was a photograph of Pedro Rodriguez, who was escorting this old man out of – out of a chicken coop.

MS. CORDOVA: Out of a chicken coop?

MS. BARRAZA: Chicken coop, out of – the – barrio – of the colonias, he was living in a chicken coop. So there was this dichotomy of this man living in – I don't know if you saw the house, you know, the university president's house, which is a beautiful Mediterranean architecture house, and he's there lounging in his home, and then right below him you see one of his professors saving this man. So he got into a lot of trouble. Shortly thereafter they sort of like pushed him out. I don't know what happened but I heard that they had pushed him out. I really don't know. I think you probably should talk to him. But he left. I think the environment was made so uncomfortable for him that he left and he went to Washington State University.

MS. CORDOVA: Now, was this time the first time that you were becoming political, or –

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, mm-hmm. Yes, because we were always told – you know, our parents, we were very protected and we didn't want to cause any waves, and I was very quiet in school. Carmen was very vocal but I wasn't vocal. I was very quiet and I was very reserved, and I didn't want to make any waves because I wanted to get good grades in school and I wanted to do what my sister did, and she was always getting good grades. And we would compete with each other. And even my grandfather would make fun of us, and we were – even in elementary, he would say, now, who got the best grades this year? And then he would tell my sister, Frances, you better be careful; Santa is right behind you. She's going to beat you – [laughs] – because he thought it was a race, because, see, my grandfather never went to school so he didn't know – he had no concept and so he'd say, you better be careful, Santa's right behind you; she's going to beat you. And then Frances would get all upset.

MS. CORDOVA: So what made you become political? What was it?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I think that I became sensitized to a lot of the issues and then I started studying the history and realizing there was a lot of injustices, and you could see it around you. I mean, you can even see it here today. You go just down and you see poverty in all this whole town, and we have the wealthiest ranch in the world – we have the King Ranch here, the wealthiest ranches in the world. And then just not far from here, just 15 minutes out, you have the Kenedy Ranch, which is another, you know – so – and then I would hear stories from my mother about the King Ranch, too, how Richard Kenedy would hire his pistoleros and they would go out and they would round up people and shoot them, and how the Mexicans were being sought after and murdered because they didn't like the way they looked and they didn't like the way they talked, or they didn't like this or that about them and they would just shoot 'em.

And my mother remembers stories, her own family being persecuted by King and the Texas Rangers, and she would tell us those stories, so we knew those stories. And we had documents to document a lot of the events, and so were well aware of all of that.

MS. CORDOVA: So this is also part of you digging into your own family history.

MS. BARRAZA: Yes. At the beginning I really – I would listen to them but it really didn't affect me any way, but later on it did affect me, you know, because I felt it was a big injustice, and even in college, even at the university my mother said that there was this invisible line and that the Mexicans were here and the white students were here, and that if you were a Mexican you couldn't sit in the front of the room because only whites were allowed to sit in the front of the room. And she would do things like dye her hair red and tell them that she was biracial and that her father was Mexican and her mother was white, and they'd say, well, Miss Barraza, it's – Miss Contreras, it's fine, you can sit in the front of the classroom. She says, and that way I could see and read the notes, because she wasn't allowed – they were not allowed. And even when you went to college you were not a regular student; you were put in the sort of like remedial program and you had to prove yourself, and once you proved yourself you could go into the regular program – the regular program at the university.

MS. CORDOVA: She actually dyed her hair?

MS. BARRAZA: Mm-hmm, she dyed her hair red.

MS. CORDOVA: To pass –

MS. BARRAZA: Right, because her name was Contreras, Frances Contreras.

MS. CORDOVA: And your experience – I mean, you had seen also division in the classroom.

MS. BARRAZA: Right.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you see that when you were going to college?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I could see some things, because when I was here – now it's completely different. Now the majority of those students are Mexican-Americans and Chicanos, but when I was there we were not the majority, and the majority were Anglo-Saxon students. And so there were – the queens, the Lantana queens were usually white girls and all of that. It was like the white students got, you know, the better opportunities at the university than the Mexican students. And then I also realized a lot of the students that I went to high school with, became very indoctrinated to the American way of living and the American way of life, and they did not want to be Mexicans; they didn't want to be Mexican-Americans, they wanted to be Americans. And that bothered me, and so I sort of like severed my ties with all of the people I knew in high school because their ideology of what they wanted out of life was completely contrary to what I wanted.

And so I felt that that's not what I wanted out of my life, and consequently I just went my own way, and I had other people that believed in my similar ideology, and I sort of joined forces or became very much in tune with what they were doing.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you find these people?

MS. BARRAZA: They were there in the art department. [Laughter.] They were all there.

MS. CORDOVA: So it was in the art department –

MS. BARRAZA: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: – that you found your community.

MS. BARRAZA: Yes. And not only – in the art department, it was open to a lot of people that were activists, for example, Carlos Guerra would always hang out with the art students, with César Martínez and José Rivera, and we were all friends, and so they would invite me to go and do things with them. We would – so I would meet these people through my art-student friends. And José Angel Guttierrez was there too. And then they were – William Renfrow, I know that Carmen has talked a lot about him, but when I was there, I really didn't take any classes with him. The only professors that I took classes with were Ben Bailey and Maurice Schmidt, and they were the ones that had a profound influence on me.

And the other professors really assisted the other students, but I didn't have that personal experience with them. The only experience I had was Dr. Scherpereel was the head of the art department at that time, and my sister Frances was attending there at that time. I think she had come back home and was taking some classes or something, and so we were work-study students and we actually worked in the art department for a while as work-study students under Dr. Sherpereel, which is kind of ironic because now I'm his boss. [Laughter.] But anyway –

So there was a lot of activism, and not only art students, but there were a lot of students from political science that were involved with the art students, or they knew each other – for example, Israel Reyna, who became an activist lawyer, who I think now practices out of Laredo, and he was from my own neighborhood. You know, we lived like one block away, so I knew him and his cousins. So he became very active, and we would meet in the student union and we would talk about La Plan de San Diego and La Plan de Aztlan. And Pedro Rodriguez would hang out with the students and they would talk about how, that there is going to be a movement, you know, there's going to be a lot of radical movement, and we're going to have to – there's going to be revolution. And by that they mean change, not revolution, but you have to make a decision as to what you're going to be doing. So there were all these talks, you know, that went on.

MS. CORDOVA: What was the focal point for the political activism? What were the most important concerns?

MS. BARRAZA: They felt that there was going to be outright revolution – at least that was my feeling – and by that meaning that there might be a point where you might have to take up arms. They even felt that that might – it might come to that and that we might have to sever ourselves from the United States, you know, like La Plan de San Diego.

MS. CORDOVA: What did you think about that?

MS. BARRAZA: I thought that was scary, but I thought, well, that might have to happen. [Phone ringing.] I should turn it off. I turned it off.

MS. CORDOVA: If it had to happen, would you have participated? What do you think you would have done?

MS. BARRAZA: I don't know. I think that that whole notion and that whole manifestos – I became very interested when I left here about the Red Baron of Rio Grande, Cortina, and I remember my mother talking about it. She says, oh, he was – because I had mentioned it to her, and she said, well, that was your – the compadre of so and so who baptized the godfather of this and that. And so – [phone ringing]. And so my mother knew about him, you know, and I thought that was amazing because here I am reading this manifesto about Cortina and my mother knew about him through the family, you know, about that his name had been mentioned, like generations beyond, behind, and through the family, and she knew of him, and not because she had read it in a history book, but because she actually knew the family, which I thought was very interesting.

And so I became very interested in that, and I started researching him at the University of Texas in the Latin American Collection, then I started looking into other things in Mexico. So this whole journey about self-discovery started –

MS. CORDOVA: In Austin or Kingsville?

MS. BARRAZA: In Austin, yes, because they did have the resources. Kingsville didn't have those resources.

MS. CORDOVA: What was your art like here at Kingsville?

MS. BARRAZA: It was very academic, exercises – design exercises, very academic. And I only took two classes, and then I did – and actually, I should show you the work; it's in the South Texas Archives, the work that I did when I was here. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: That's great to know.

MS. BARRAZA: And Carmen's work is there too.

MS. CORDOVA: Hers is too? Is all of your work – like José Rivera's, was his –

MS. BARRAZA: I don't know. You'd have to – there's hundreds and hundreds of prints, and actually right now we're doing an art preservation committee to preserve the work and to actually catalogue it. So it's being catalogued right now. And actually, Carmen's prints, I have them in my office. I framed them. Well, actually what happened is they were being kept in a room there in the art department, and humidity started getting to it and they started to actually grow mold or something, so that's when I took them to the framer, I said, I'm going to get them framed. And so I got them framed.

MS. CORDOVA: Have they ever been shown?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, when Carmen was here in April for "The Creative Hands," we had an exhibition of her work, and so we showed them.

MS. CORDOVA: And your work, has that been shown?

MS. BARRAZA: I showed it when I had a retrospective – I showed one. But there were others and they disappeared, so I don't know where they are. And even some of Carmen's disappeared too, because what – see, when I became chair, all of those – were prints, they were in this middle room, and when I became chair they were moved, and like in the summers I wouldn't be here – I think I went to Oaxaca to teach in Oaxaca, so when I came back, my office had been moved – everything had been moved, and they moved all of those prints and they gave them to the South Texas Archives, and I was very upset because I felt those belong to the art department, they don't belong to South Texas Archives, but they already gave it to them. So when I found Carmen's prints I said, I'm not going to give them this. So I keep them in my office but I actually probably should give it to her. We're not organizing it into like a permanent collection.

MS. CORDOVA: So was it mostly printmaking that you were doing here?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, the ones that were preserved were – the faculty member that is responsible for the preservation of that was Maurice Schmidt, because the students would make additions, so they would make several prints, and he would take one of the students – I guess most of the students, so he had hundreds and hundreds because he's still teaching, is semi-retired, and he was here 38 years. So in that timeframe, he collected an astronomical amount of prints. It's just incredible what he did, but if it hadn't been for him, we wouldn't have had that stuff. Can you imagine?

MS. CORDOVA: That's amazing.

MS. BARRAZA: And then when I saw those prints, I didn't even remember them. I said, these are not mine; they're so bad! I think I did a tree and a landscape. You won't believe Carmen's work; it's abstract.

MS. CORDOVA: Really?

MS. BARRAZA: Some is mushrooms.

MS. CORDOVA: Mushrooms? [Laughs.]

MS. BARRAZA: Yes. Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Really?

MS. BARRAZA: I'll have to show it to you. I'll show it to you tomorrow.

MS. CORDOVA: That was in her hippie phase?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, because they were all doing hippie stuff, yeah. José Rivera had an afro like this and he wore black. He used to drive around and he was really something. Everybody loved him.

MS. CORDOVA: Were you a hippie?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, I guess we all – we all wore our bellbottoms. We wore our bellbottoms and – but I wasn't so much a hippie when I was here; I think when I left.

MS. CORDOVA: To Austin?

MS. BARRAZA: To Austin, because everybody was a hippie there. Everybody had their little tank tops, little panos – the little girls had the panos, and I had my little clogs, wooden clogs with my bellbottoms. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: So, yeah, what was Austin like as a completely new experience for you?

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, it was so different, and at one point I thought it was like heaven.

MS. CORDOVA: I'm going to stop the tape. Let's pick up with that. So let's stop.

[Break.]

MS. CORDOVA: Okay, this is Cary Cordova interviewing Santa Barraza at the artist's studio in Kingsville, Texas, and it's still Friday, November 21st, 2003, and this is disk number two. And we just ended our last disk with the question of what Austin was like when the artist first arrived, what her first experience was like.

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I think I need to tell you that it was very difficult to get there because of the things my father said to me, but I had to get there and they had to drive me there, and in order for them to drive me there, you had to cart all these kids in your car, right? And it's – like not it's about four hours to get to Austin from here, but at that time there weren't these superhighways that take you to Austin, so we had to go through all the little back roads, and so it would take us like a whole day to get there. And I don't even remember where my parents stayed, because they came back that same day, so it was really – it was very difficult for them, because here they're very humble and they're very poor, but they made the effort, and I just don't remember – I don't recall, but I think that on the way there we probably ate bologna sandwiches, or I don't know what, because I remember my mother would carry the sandwiches with her, and that's how we would feed – and we would stop and have like some drinks or whatever. It was rough.

And when we got there, the first – my first impression when I went there, I couldn't believe it because we – we drive into "The Drag" [The area of Guadalupe street across from the University of Texas at Austin], right, and there are all these long girls with little tank tops and little handkerchiefs over their breast, and these hip-hugger pants or shorts, or little bitty shorts cut off with their jeans, and I'm thinking, they're going to school this way? Yeah, they went to school that way. [Laughs.] I thought, oh, my god. I couldn't believe it. But not everybody was that way, but the majority were. They were very loose and – not bras, you know, and very different.

MS. BARRAZA: Had you ever been to Austin before?

MS. CORDOVA: No – well, I remember going to Austin but I don't remember that because I don't think that we were – we went to my sister's apartment, and of course she had her roommates and they would drive us around, and I only had been there for a couple of days and I came back on the bus with my brother, so I don't remember

that at all, because I guess they were older – her friends were older and they were more settled and more conservative, but this was like the young kids out on "The Drag," and then the art department was that way too. It was like – it was something else. And then when I started taking the professors, they were something else too, you know.

I had this one professor by the name of Kolb, and he had been at Yale, and later on I found out – and later on – I mean, like just recently when I was at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, because one of the professors that's there – oh, what is his name? – Baio –

MS. CORDOVA: Baio?

MS. BARRAZA: Eugene Baio. Eugene Baio was a professor at UT Austin when I was a student, and when I went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to teach there, he was also a professor there. And I said, I remember you; you were in University of Texas. He says, were you there? I said, yeah. And he says, well, you're an associate professor here and I'm just an adjunct; what happened there? [Laughs.] And then he started telling me all the stories about the University of Texas, and he told me about this guy, Kolb – who I loved; he was my professor. He was like a really good professor. He was very loose and very unstructured. And he said, well, they finally got – I said, what ever happened to him? He says, oh, they finally got rid of him because they found out that at Yale he burned a building. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: Oh my goodness.

MS. BARRAZA: So those were my professors.

MS. CORDOVA: Kolb with a K?

MS. BARRAZA: K-O-L-B.

MS. CORDOVA: K-O-L-B.

MS. BARRAZA: Right, and his class was very innovative, but it had nothing to do with Chicano art. These classes had nothing to do with Chicano art. They were very mainstream, they were very avant-garde, they were very abstract, and so his classes, we started doing performance art. So what we would do – yeah – what we would do is he would get all the students together and then we would go to a location. He'd say, well, on this day, on such and such hour – like one of the projects, he divided up the class into five groups, and there were maybe four members to each group, and we were supposed to be at a certain location at a certain time, and a certain minute we were supposed to do things. And one of the things that we did is we had to go – I think I went to Town Lake with three other students, and at a certain time – we had these balloons and we released them out in the air. So all these balloons were going – it was out in the news: all these balloons are out in the air and they didn't know why.

And then we did another project where we all had to go at night – I think it was midnight. We had to go all around campus to certain buildings, and at the entrance we had to make this sign with chalk on the cement. So we did that; it was a performance. And then the next day it came out in the school paper that it was witchcraft, that they were afraid these people were causing voodoo around campus, and all this talk, but it was us. [Laughter.] It was part of an art class.

MS. CORDOVA: That's fascinating.

MS. BARRAZA: So it was a lot of fun. So I really enjoyed him. And we would go to the park. We would go to – what was it, that character? They would give him a picnic every year – the little donkey ride and the little bear [Winnie the Pooh].

MS. CORDOVA: [Inaudible.]

MS. BARRAZA: Eeyore's party. So we would go to that as part of the performance, too, you know, in his class. It was very fun. So I really enjoyed it. It was very different. I'd never done anything like that, so I really enjoyed that class.

And then – you know, but all of my professors were male, white professors. You know, they were all male, they were all – I mean, I had Vince Mariani, who was a student of Josef Albers, or Rico Lebrun at Yale. And I had Bob Levers, Robert Levers was also a student at Yale, graduate. And I studied with all of the Bauhaus professors. So I was very mainstream, and so I felt like –

MS. CORDOVA: Because there was no other options.

MS. BARRAZA: That's right, there was no other option, and they were all white males. There was only – [noise in

background]

MS. CORDOVA: Turn that off.

MS. BARRAZA: Yeah, we can turn it off. Do you want me to do that?

[Break.]

MS. CORDOVA: We're back. So you were telling me about the –

MS. BARRAZA: The classes?

MS. CORDOVA: – white male professors.

MS. BARRAZA: Right. I think the only female professor that I had was an art educator, but I only took one class with her. But there were other – there were other female professors but they were not in the art department. I remember I took one in – I think it had to do with sociology or anthropology, because you had to take other courses beside art classes – academic courses and humanities – and so I took this class, but all she did was we talked about – we talked about the Mexican-American experience. And the other class that I took that was very interesting is I actually studied with Dr. Jorge Bustamante. He taught a class there on Mexico and the borderlands, and that was a very interesting class.

MS. CORDOVA: What was that like?

MS. BARRAZA: It was very interesting because of course we read *Occupied America* [Rodolfo Acuña. *Occupied America; the Chicano's struggle toward liberation*. San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1972]. We read – you know, by Rudy [Rodolfo], and we had – we also read his book on immigration, and he also would assign us all these things, like to go to the library and read the hearings, the civil rights hearings, because he was involved with the hearings in Washington, D.C., so he would give us his very – because I wasn't used to any of that, but it was very good because it sort of sensitized me to what was going on in the real world and politics.

And he would tell us these stories, and it was very moving. He'd tell us a story about how he decided to become a professor, because he said he was a lawyer in Mexico City, studying – I mean, very successful as a lawyer with his clients, and it dawned on him that he was serving a very rich clientele and that it was very much removed from what he envisioned doing in law. So he started reading all about immigration and the problems that the undocumented workers were having. And at that time Cesar Chavez was involved in – and we were in school. That was one good thing about Austin, they had a lot of resources, and so I got to meet Cesar Chavez and Corky Gonzalez and – because we brought them to campus, and so I actually got – I think I have it somewhere – the document of "Tierra Amarilla" [a land grant movement in New Mexico headed by Reies Lopez Tijerina] that he signed for me. So we got – we had those type of opportunities, that we would never get in Kingsville.

But what I was saying –

MS. CORDOVA: Did Cesar Chavez ever come to Kingsville?

MS. BARRAZA: Probably not. I know that there were farm workers in south Texas, but you don't really – well, they paid him very well so he did go there, but he also not only went to the university but he went to the community. I remember that we went – and I think it was probably because of Dr. Jorge Bustamante who encouraged us to go to that, because otherwise I wouldn't have gone because I didn't know anything. I was very naive. And so they had functions in the community in cultural centers, so I would actually go into East Austin to all these events that were happening with the farm workers that I wouldn't have had those opportunities if it had not been for these scholars that encouraged us to do that. So it was very exciting at that point.

MS. CORDOVA: Were these classes out of the Center for Mexican-American studies at that time?

MS. BARRAZA: No, they were in sociology.

MS. CORDOVA: In sociology.

MS. BARRAZA: Mm-hmm. So he was actually a professor in sociology. He was a visiting scholar and then he left and became president of Colegio del Norte [Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Tijuana, Mexico. Prominent Mexican institute for the study of border issues.] and I think – now he is at Notre Dame. But for all I know he's retired now. But anyway –

MS. CORDOVA: And then the female professor that you had for the Mexican-American experience –

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, it was a Mexican-American class. She was Anglo-Saxon, so she relied on us to give her more

of the information than she imparted to us, so I was a little bit disappointed.

Then I did have a class with José Limon. I wasn't too encouraged; I actually dropped his class.

MS. CORDOVA: Really? Why weren't you encouraged?

MS. BARRAZA: Because I felt that we weren't really learning what I was there to learn. We got to hear a lot of his personal stories about his girlfriends and I wasn't there to listen about his girlfriends, so I dropped the class. But I did take a class with Dr. Jacinto Quirarte and we actually had the first formal art history class on Mexican-American art. And that was very exciting because that's where I met a lot of my friends that to this day have become my friends, who are activists. You know, so I met them there at that class.

MS. CORDOVA: What was that class like?

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, it's very different because his manuscript was being worked on to be published. This is before the book was even published, the Mexican-American book, and so he – what we had was Xerox copies of his manuscript, and then he would have slides. And he was – the work that he showed us, it was very traditional work. Some of it was very mainstream. But then you had like the younger artists who were part of that, and it was good because we had to learn. We didn't know anything about ourselves, so at least we're learning something, whereas I felt – but what was also good about the University of Texas is they had like one of the leading Latin American art history classes in the world. We had – and even Fernando De Szyszlo was teaching there, and there was another guy by the name of Celorio I think; he was an art historian from Mexico City. You had Barnett there. We had the Barbara Duncan collection – it's the Barbara Duncan Collection of Latin American art. We had the Michener Collection of Casasola photographs. That's where I actually saw the Casasola photographs. And they had also Stan – is it Stan? Stan I think is his name. He also photographed the Mexican Revolution in Mexico as a photographer. And so I actually saw those photographs in the Michener Collection.

And then they had the Texas Memorial Museum that had the history of the indigenous people of Texas, and so I was very much fascinated by that. And I actually tried to see, where do I fit in into the scheme of things and how long are they here, because we never studied that in school. So for me it was exciting, a learning experience.

But then, on the other hand, there were very few Chicanos – go for months. In the art department I think there was a just a handful of Chicanos. I think I was the first Mexican-American woman who graduated in MFA from UT-Austin in 1982, yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Wow, congratulations.

MS. BARRAZA: So, you know, it was kind of sad, you know?

MS. CORDOVA: So tell me about being a woman on that campus at that time. I mean – encountering, I don't know, the José Limon class. What were the limitations?

MS. BARRAZA: There were very limitations because you could not do cultural art; you had to do mainstream art. Now, there were some professors that were very supportive. Like for example, I had – Perry? Oh, I just saw him; he came to my opening. I actually had Fearing – Fearing, F-E-A-R-I-N-G, he was one of my professors. And then I had – oh, what was his name? Fearing, F-E-A-R-I-N-G, and then there was another one, and I think it was Fearing who actually encouraged me in graduate school a lot, and he was very supportive of me, and I learned a lot from him. And he published – he's an art educator and a lot of the other professors didn't like him because, well, he's not a studio artist, he's an educator. But he was very, very – I learned a lot, like I learned to do a lot of techniques that to this day I still utilize in my work. I learned how to do gold leafing, I learned how to do monoprints, I learned how to actually think about composition in a different way and make it very personal. So he helped me a lot. Kelly Fearing, that's his name, Kelly Fearing – wonderful guy, wonderful professor.

MS. CORDOVA: And how did you end up in his class?

MS. BARRAZA: I just signed up for it because I needed a class, and I just signed up for it on a graduate level. And then – or maybe I heard from – I don't remember, but I think somebody told me about him and I think it might have been Santa Rodriguez, who actually did her undergraduate work there. She was from Mexico City, and she did her undergrad – she actually went to Austin Community College. She was a lot younger than I was, and when I was a graduate student she was an undergrad. And I think she was taking a class from him, and she told me, you should come to his class and see what he's doing; he's doing a lot of good things. So I think I went to his class, and that's where I got really excited about what he was doing, and then I decided to work with him. So he was really wonderful.

And there was another professor, Faring, I think – F-A-R-I-N-G – but I'm not quite sure that was his name. But they all came to my opening when I had a retrospective in Austin. It was so nice to see them. Well, actually they

came – they came to my opening and they also came – and then I also studied with – who was on my committee – with – he's an art historian – oh, what was his name? Green? Is it Green? It'll come to me. I'm getting old. He was an art historian of Latin American art, and he was very good, and I learned a lot from him. And he had an MFA in painting and he also had a Ph.D. in art history, so he was on my committee and he was very supportive of me.

So they were – but they were all men, you know, so I think that in a way – and you sort of begin to think that way. You begin to think very male oriented and you begin to think that way, and I guess that's what led me into thinking that – what about the women? And I became exposed to the feminist movement. And I think probably what really led me into thinking more about my identity and my gender is the fact that I did see Peterson and – was it Sutherland's? – exhibition of women artists from 1200 to the 1950's [*Women Artists: recognition and reappraisal from the early middle ages to the twentieth century*. Karen Peters and J.J. Wilson, New York: New York University Press, 1976]. It came to the University of Texas to the Michener Collection Museum. And I saw the Frida Kahlo paintings and I saw – what is it? – Gonzalez paintings, and I saw Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings, you know, in the style of Caravaggio, and huge, wonderful oil paintings, and I was so enthused.

And at that time I had become part of an art group called Los Quemados [the burned ones] out of Austin and San Antonio, and César Martínez was a member of that. And this was after we were already through with college and we were just doing our art. And then I was working at Steck-Vaughan with my friend Nora, and we became members of – well, I was a member with Amado – Amado Peña was living in Austin. He had gone to Crystal City then he went to Austin. So Amado Peña was there, Carmen Lomas Garza was there, and José Treviño was there in Austin, so we all became – César Martínez, we all became part of his group called Los Quemados, and they broke away from the Con Safo group because they thought it was too conservative, even though I know I've told what's-her-name, [Alicia Gaspar] de Alba [*Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master's House: cultural politics and the CARA exhibition*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas UP, 1998], when she wrote in her book, that she misquoted us, because she actually interviewed myself and – César Martínez and myself about the Quemados, and she wrote in her book that we wanted to be – that we were not political enough and that that's why we broke away from the Con Safo, which, on the contrary, we didn't think it was political enough, and that's why broke away from them and formed our own group.

MS. CORDOVA: Why wasn't it political? What –

MS. BARRAZA: The Con Safo? I think at one point – see, I wasn't a member of the Con Safo, but I know Amado Peña was and César Martínez, and also I think José Treviño was a member of that Con Safo group, and they felt that they were accepting a lot of members into the group that weren't really artists, like they accepted Jacinto Quirarte, and he was an art historian. And they were like outraged because they didn't like his book anyway, they didn't like the fact that he didn't include the young Chicanos; he only included like the very conservative established artists that were doing very mainstream art, and they were outraged at that. And so they felt that it was going to be like very European, very conservative art, and they left; they didn't like it. And so they felt that they needed to form a group that was more political, more Chicano, more contemporary, more cutting edge, and so they formed the Quemados because they were burned out with those guys, so they formed the Quemados.

But I was the only female, and Carmen – and then Carmen left Austin, because we were based in Austin. She left Austin and went to – I think she went to Washington and then she went to California. So when she left I was the only female, and so I felt kind of out of place and so I decided, well – at that time I was working at Steck-Vaughan and I told Nora, well, why don't you join the group? And she said, oh, I'm not really an artist; I'm doing more graphic design. But she was a great painter and so I kept talking to her and encouraging her, and finally I talked to Amado and I asked Amado, Amado, how do we get more people involved in the group? And he said, well, have them put a portfolio together and we'll have a meeting and we'll look at their work and then we'll make a decision. So Nora hesitantly did it. She put a portfolio together and showed it to them and they had this little appointment, but of course I wasn't invited, so I wasn't there. So they reviewed her work, and then they told her that they thought she needed more development and she couldn't be part of the group, and she was devastated. And after that happened – and I don't think she remembers it because I talked to her recently about it and she doesn't remember it. But I think that sometimes when things happen to you, you sort of like push it out of your mind, or maybe she just told me that. I don't know.

But anyway, I remember it very vividly because after that incident, I kept telling her that we should form a women's group because the feminist movement was in, and that we should do a Chicana group. And she kept saying no, that she didn't think it was necessary, that we could work on our own, and we would be recognized for what we are. And when that happened to her, she said you know what, let's do it. So then we formed MAS, Mujeres Artistas del Suroeste [1977- mid 1980s], and we got a studio space. We got it up above Antone's on Sixth Street.

MS. CORDOVA: That was called Antone's? [Laughs.]

MS. BARRAZA: Mm-hmm. Well, at that time, Antone's was on Fifth or Sixth – I think it was Fifth.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah.

MS. BARRAZA: Fifth and Trinity, I think. What is the street beyond Congress? Is it Lavaca or Trinity? It's Trinity, right?

MS. CORDOVA: It's Trinity.

MS. BARRAZA: Okay, so it was Fifth and Trinity, right there on that corner. I think now it's Kinko's or it's something else now, but it used to be an old building. And it was two floors, and we had the second floor, and the first floor was Antone's. So at night we would hear all this wonderful music as we were working. And it was real cheap. It was like $75 a month. And we would all just pitch in $10, $5, and we got this space. And we would all get together and we would paint together. And Sylvia Orozco was a member of it, you know, who just called me, and even Modesta [Barbina] Treviño, José 's wife, who was in the Jacinto Quirarte class became a member because she started doing weaving. She would even go to Guatemala and study with the indigenous women how to do weavings, and so she was doing weavings, and so she became a member, and Alicia Arredondo. And Nancy de los Santos is a filmmaker who was a member of the group, too.

MS. CORDOVA: Oh, okay.

MS. BARRAZA: Mm-hmm. And Yolanda Petrocelli, who's a photographer in Connecticut, she was there, too. And who else? Oh, even Monte Montemayor, who's now deceased, became a member also at one point. So then the membership sort of like flared up, not just from Austin, but we had like members from the outside.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you meet Nora [González-Dodson]?

MS. BARRAZA: We were in art school. We were at the University of Texas. She's from Laredo, and we had art classes together. And then we started working together. She got the job at Steck-Vaughn, and then she called me and she says, "We have an opening. Can you come and bring your portfolio? Mr. Phillips, who was the art director, has seen your work." I would have because César Martínez would organize all these shows. He was living in San Antonio. He would come to Austin, get artwork from us, and organize these shows in Austin and San Antonio. And he was then involved in *El Canto*, *El Caracol* publication. He would write for *Caracol*, and he was buddies with – because he and Cecilio Camarillo, who was a writer. He's now deceased. He passed away last year from cancer, but he was editor and publisher or founder of that magazine in San Antonio, and they were –

MS. CORDOVA: Of *Caracol*?

MS. BARRAZA: Of *Caracol*, and also El Canto Festival, they put it together. So it was César Martínez and Cecelio, but César and Cecelio and Amado went to high school together in Laredo, so that's how they knew each other. So – [chuckles] –

MS. CORDOVA: It's amazing how you all knew each other. [Laughter.]

MS. BARRAZA: Yeah. So anyway, he would go to Austin, and at that time I had my little baby. He would come and knock on my door and say, Santa, you got some work? I'm organizing a canto, floating canto – floating canto festival in San Antonio. I would like to have some of your pieces. So I would give him some of my pieces. So people started to know my work, and sometimes – I think one time we had it at the auditorium, and Mr. Phillips, the art director, saw my work there. He liked it a lot, and then when he had an opening he told Nora, "Do you know this artist? Can you ask her? Do you think she might be interested in applying here?"

So when Nora called me, I said, "Well, Nora, you know, I don't really – I'm not a graphic designer, you know. I do drawings." And she said, "It's okay; bring your drawings. He just wants to see a little bit of what – your color theory, what you do with color, and what you do with drawings." So I took a portfolio and I got the job, so I started working there as a graphic designer. We were senior designers, so she and I were senior designers.

I stayed there for like three or four years and then I left, but she stayed there and she became the art director, and then she formed her own company. She's very successful. [Laughter.] So anyway, that's how we formed this group, so we co-founded it.

MS. CORDOVA: I realize that feminism was becoming more prominent at that time, but what was it specifically that was speaking to you?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, the first exhibit that we had, we had we actually got together and then there were other groups that were being formed, like Women & Their Work. Rita Starpattern and – was it Cynthia Peterson [Deanna Stevenson], I think was her name, or Sylvia Peterson? She and Rita co-founded Women & Their Work, Incorporated. And so they started to put exhibits together and they would invite us.

And the very first exhibit that they got together that was like a professional exhibit was actually done in Laguna Gloria Art Museum, and it was called – oh, I don't remember what it was called – but it was a women's exhibition in the '70s. I think it was 1975 or 1976 because we formed it like in 1975. And so they put this women's exhibit together and they invited us. They said, "We want you to be a part of this." And so – and they had two exhibits. They had one in Laguna Gloria, and they had one in Juarez-Lincoln because Juarez-Lincoln University was there and they formed this gallery there, which was Tonantzín.

So when we formed MAS, they asked us to come and do some of their exhibits, like organize the gallery, organize exhibits there. So we were doing that, and so we had a show there and we had one at Laguna Gloria in collaboration with Women & Their Work, Incorporated. And then they asked me to be part of the advisory board or part of the board, so I was part of the board for a while, so we became real good friends.

MS. CORDOVA: And how did they know you, or how did you even meet them? How did they know your art was out there to be invited?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I was already exhibiting. I even started exhibiting before I was – before I even finished college. I started exhibiting in '73 because they would invite – they would have like, I don't know, Hispanic festivals and they would invite me to exhibit. I would show in a high school and I would show at a cultural center. I would show in like – Sylvia Orozco and I even had a show at Texas A&M on the main campus in College Station at the student union, they invited us. And I would show with, what was her name, Carmen Rodriguez, who was living there at that time. We had shows at the student union at the university, so people knew us. And then when we formed a group, we started organizing exhibits.

So we had exhibits not only in Austin, but we also had them in San Antonio and in Mission, and we even got to the point – we were together for 10 years. We even got to the point where we even had some exhibits in Arizona. So – [laughs] – it's crazy, right?

MS. CORDOVA: What was the first exhibit of your work?

MS. BARRAZA: I have to look at my résumé. [Laughter.] It was in 1973, I believe, or 1972. I think they invited us to exhibit with Posada. They had prints of Posada Guadalupe, José Guadalupe Posada, at this center that was on the university, but I think it was – it was one of those businesses that I think Juarez-Lincoln had put together. And it was some minority organization that was a business on campus, and they had something to do with the university, but I really don't understand. And so they put this festival together and they invited us to actually be part of it. And so they had these prints of José Guadalupe Posada, and they invited the local artists to also exhibit with José Guadalupe Posada.

So I remember having that show, but also Rita included us in some of her exhibitions, and then we had shows at the gallery at Juarez-Lincoln. And then – I forget some of the other things. Oh, since we were a women's group, they would invite us – like, we had a show at Bread & Roses Gallery or Bread & Roses co-op, which was sort of like a feminist – it was a left-wing organization, grassroots organization in the community. And then Marta Cortera had her organization, and Marta would invite us also to be part of – she would put these exhibits together, and she had a center with what's her name, Evey Chapa, who by the way is now living Corpus Christi.

And Evey Chapa and Marta Cortera had an organization going for women [Mujeres por la Raza], and they would invite us to exhibit there. So I think people – and their organization was right across campus. They were in actually the Methodist student center, I think, which is right – or Presbyterian student center. It was right on the drag across from the university, so they were like centrally located. So everybody would see their work, so that's how they got to see my work I guess. So –

MS. CORDOVA: Okay. Do you remember the first work that you sold?

MS. BARRAZA: César sold some of my work, but I don't even know who he sold it to. He would just bring me the money. [Laughs.] He sold some pieces in San Antonio. And they were very abstract.

MS. CORDOVA: Really? So that was what your work was like at that time?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, it was mainly stuff that I was doing after I became or during the time – because he started showing my work when I was a student. So some of it was student work, paintings I had done as projects for class. Others were things that I started doing afterwards, so they were very different. One of my classes I took was constructivism, which I did resin casting. So I had sculpture made out of resin and I had sculpture made out of plexiglass.

MS. CORDOVA: So you went into 3-D?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, but I really didn't – I enjoy painting more than drawing. So yeah, I took them because it was

required; you have to take them. And I enjoyed them, but it was very expensive. I even did pieces out of neon. I did neon pieces, yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: What happened to all those pieces?

MS. BARRAZA: When I was in Pennsylvania I had some of them, and then my former husband followed me over there and he decided he was going to help me move, and then they disappeared. So I don't know if he was responsible for that or if they just disappeared, but they were in storage and then I lost them. And actually those were some of the very first pieces where I started thinking about the female body because that was plexiglass and it was red and clear, and it was like this, and it was like rounded like this. It was like a tube that was rounded like this, and sort of – and then you had a white pediment or instrument in it that was made out of wood with a neon tube, and you would light it up and it would light red. So it was sort of like the male, the female copulation I think, but very abstract. You couldn't tell that's what it was.

MS. CORDOVA: But that's what it started you thinking about –

MS. BARRAZA: The female body, mm-hmm, and also the women's group that I was involved with, seeing – also, J.J. Peterson [sic] called me at one point to send her slides to be included, slide collection of feminist art in California. And that's how I found out about her book and the exhibition they were organizing, and I saw it in Austin. And then I went to Dallas – or Houston. I went to Houston and saw Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, and I was very much enthused by that and started reading *From the Center*, Lucy Lippard. So yes, all of that started. Women's House –started reading about Women's House and became very enthused about it.

But I did it all on my own, you know, outside of the university because I had already graduated. And then the university had like 200 or I don't know how many paintings of Frida Kahlo. And they were on exhibit one time and I went to see them.

MS. CORDOVA: When was that?

MS. BARRAZA: In the early '70s because – one of the – I think one of the things that we did as MAS is we organized this conference called Chicano – Plástica Chicana Conferencia, 1979 [Conferencia del Plástica Chicana, September 13 – 16, 1979]. And one of the scholars that we invited was Raquel Tibol, who is a leading critic on Diego Rivera, and she had just published a book with Frida Kahlo [*Escrituras./ Frida Kahlo; selección, proemio y notas*. Mexico: Universidad Autónama de México, 1999]. And one of the persons that was helping us – I mean, we had a lot of people helping us. Jacinto Quirarte opened up the conference with Pedro Rodriguez, and you know, they said like opening remarks to the conference. And we actually had it at the University of Texas in the Art Department and the LBJ Library, the conference room. And we invited all – we invited all these scholars. Judy Baca came, Carmen Lomas Garza. José Rivera – I mean José Montoya was there, and he did this poem that says this is La Tomba de LBJ. It was incredible. It was in La Tomba de LBJ. That's where I met José. So that's how we know each other, because we met at this conference. José Treviño came, the filmmaker, and we brought a show of Manuel Álvarez Bravo from Mexico City, and that's where I met him. And that's how I met these artists in Mexico, because I – and what's his name, Raul Valdez was living in Austin; he still lives there. But what was his name, Leo Tanguma was in Austin or he was in Houston and he brought some of his murals to the show. And anyway, it was an incredible function because this was the first time – we sort of like – we were what, like 24 or I don't know how old we were, '79. And we started organizing a year before as a project of MAS, and –

MS. CORDOVA: Who came up with the idea, or how did you guys –

MS. BARRAZA: We would just get together and brainstorm, you know, and we felt, you know, we have got to do something, for – I think – how did it get started? Oh, I remember how that started is that we were doing a mural. When I was in graduate school, I was doing a fiberglass mural and Carmen Lomas Garza came to visit because her sister, Mary Jane Garza, was living there. And Mary Jane Garza had told them about the mural we were doing, so she brought them over to our studio at the university, and here comes Carmen.

And we were doing this mural inside the building, and she said, "Oh, you're doing it all wrong." See, Carmen was always like that: "You're doing it all wrong." And she says, "You know, you guys are just wasting your time." And she was right. She says, "Take this – we were doing the cartoons – take this paper and just fold it in half," because we were doing the grid system and we were measuring and taking all these measurements. "Just fold it half and measure this and use this as a pattern," which was true. We could have used it that way; we just didn't think. But she was so practical about things. I mean, she has so much common sense. It was incredible. It was sort of infuriating that she came out of nowhere and told us you're doing it all wrong, which was true. "Just take this and make this pattern and it will be – go faster. You will finish it in no time," because we were taking all this time.

So she – so when she came, I told her, "Carmen, we have been thinking – because we already had MAS – we have been thinking about doing this project. We're thinking of doing a conference on Chicano art." And we asked

her what do you think. And she looked at us, she says, “You guys aren’t ready. Don’t even think about it. You guys aren’t ready for that.” And I looked at her and she says, “You’re not ready. You guys don’t know what you’re getting yourself into. That’s a lot of work. That’s a lot of money.” We said “Oh, okay,” so we didn’t say anything to her after that.

So we wrote the proposals and we got the money. And we invited Carmen and we paid her airfare from San Francisco to come to Texas and do a lecture. And we invited Raquel Tibol and we brought Isabel Castro [sic]. Who was Isabel Castro [sic]? The director of the Smithsonian – I mean, the director of the Anthropology Museum of Mexico. Her name was Castroyal. Castroyal was her last – I don’t remember her first name – and she came from the anthropology museum. We invited Pedro Meyer, the photographer. We invited Adolfo Mejía. We invited Adolfo Mexiac. We invited Shifra Goldman. It was incredible.

And José Montoya came, and even – what was his name – José – he was the founder of the museum in Chicago – José Rodriguez or José Martinez. He might be deceased now because like when I was in Chicago, he was real sick. But he was the founder of the first Chicano organization in Chicago, that later became the Mexican center – Fine Arts Center Museum. But he was the founder of that museum. And he came, and all of a sudden he shows up in Juarez-Lincoln with two little suitcases, came – I don’t know how he got there. [Laughs.] It was a riot, so – I mean, we have never done this before.

And I – so Sylvia Orozco was studying at San Carlos Academy of Art, doing her masters on murals. And I told Sylvia, “Sylvia, we want to do this conference. Can you help us out with the Mexican end? You get the artists.” And she says, “Well, Santa, you have got to send a consultant over here so we can tell them what’s going on.” And I said, “Well, who do you recommend?” She says, “Anybody.” So the only person I could think that knew anything about murals was Raul Valdez, who was in Austin. And so I asked Raul because he had been to Mexico, he knew a lot of the muralists and a lot of the artists.

So I told Raul, “Are you interested in going to Mexico City? I will pay you an honorarium, your airfare, and expenses to go and convince these artists, because Sylvia says you have to come personally.” And I said, “I can’t come; I’m too busy. And I was organizing all this stuff.” And so – and everybody was helping, but it was like a madhouse. And so she says, “Well, send Raul.” And so we sent him, and she calls me and she said, “Get the fuck over here. Raul has alienated all the artists. They’re not going to go; they’re not going to go to Austin. They are so mad at him they won’t even talk to him. You need to come here.” And I said, Sylvia, “I have never been to Mexico. I don’t know how to go there.” She says, “You get on a plane tonight and you get over here.” So I got on a plane and I went to Mexico City. It was the greatest experience. [Laughs.]

MS. CORDOVA: Maybe that’s the perfect point for us to pick up tomorrow. So we start with Mexico City and our primary topic, and I’m going to have to stop it, unfortunately, because our time has run out and I’m so sad. Okay, so end of our disk.

[Break.]

MS. CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova interviewing Santa Barraza at the artist’s studio in Kingsville, Texas on Saturday, November 22, 2003 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is our second session, disk number one.

And, Santa, we had ended our last session with a memory about your first time going to Mexico in relation to the conference. So maybe you could tell us – or start us back with how that opportunity emerged and what that meant to you. Your first trip to Mexico.

MS. BARRAZA: I think to rephrase is that that was not my first trip to Mexico. That was my first trip to Mexico City, but growing up in South Texas we would always go to the border. So I did have knowledge of the border and the cities – Matamoros and Reynosa, and Nuevo Laredo – because of our proximity to the border, but never going into the interior.

So when we put the Conferencia Plástica Chicana together, we sent an artist to actually go and secure – because I was told by Sylvia Orozco that the Mexicans would not confirm their participation in a conference through a telephone or through a letter because we sent them letters, we even made phone calls and they never responded. And Sylvia was supposed to – Sylvia Orozco was supposed to have gotten the presenters together that were coming from Mexico City, but apparently they failed to respond to her and they wanted someone to go personally and talk to them about what was going to happen here, what were the expectations of them, etc.

So we sent an artist to talk to them, and she called me saying that it wasn’t working out, that I needed to get on a plane and go and remedy the situation because there was a lot of chaos and misunderstanding. So I actually got on a plane and I went to Mexico City and had a meeting with several of the artists. One of the artists that I first met was Raquel Tibol, and I believe it was Mejía was his last name, I think it was Adolfo Mejía. And Raquel Tibol of course was secretary – personal secretary to Diego Rivera and published I think twenty-something books

on Diego Rivera and lived with him and Frida Kahlo during the last years of her life. And she was – at that point, she was one of the leading art critics in Mexico City, so it was really a pleasure to meet her.

And we sat down and discussed what we were going to be doing at the conference and what the expectations were and that it would be a three-day conference and that we would pay their flights and that we would put them up and feed them, etc. And we wanted her to actually present a lecture on Frida Kahlo. So it was – so then slowly I had meetings with a lot of the artists and the presenters, and they agreed to come.

And one of the things I had to do also is go and meet with Manuel Álvarez Bravo because he was pretty advanced in his age at that time. I think at that time he was in his 80s and he was in very delicate situations, and so he asked me if I could go to his house. So it was very exciting to go to Coyoacan and go visit him, and it was a very interesting experience because when I got there I remember this house that was like this black rock – volcanic black rock – and there were like big stones and it was all behind a barricaded fence, and once you get it in it was like this big stone – black stone house. As you went in it was like a sunken living room, so you were actually coming in on a ledge all around the house, and then there was – the living quarters were downstairs.

It was very wonderful to meet him, and he was very small, probably five feet tall, long white hair, very thin, wearing glasses, very proper, and it was quite an experience to meet him. And what I wanted to is to invite him to come to the conference and present on his work, but he wasn't in very good conditions and he was hesitant to travel. He wanted his wife, who was a lot younger than he, to travel with him, and his wife was busy and didn't want to come, had other engagements, couldn't come at that time.

And so the best thing that we could do is actually convince him to give us a series of photographs, so we actually got an exhibition of his work. And so, we actually were able to secure I think there were 40 photographs that we brought to the Texas Memorial Museum as part of the conference. So that was quite an honor to meet him, and I met some of his assistants and of course Sylvia Orozco went with me to talk to him and meet him. So it was amazing.

And then of course I had a little bit of time. I didn't have a lot of time, but I actually went, I believe, and saw – visited some of the museums: Anthropology Museum, Museum of Modern Art, and visited some of murals. But I did not go to Teotihuacan or any of the ancient archaeological sites at that time. I did not go to the Basilica de la Virgin Guadalupe; you know it was just within the city. And so that was very productive, and I met a lot of the artists and they came.

And it was a very successful conference. We had two exhibits. We had the Manuel Álvarez Bravo photographs and then we had a Chicano art exhibit, which was at Tonantzín, which was the gallery of the – gallería – gallery of Juarez-Lincoln University. And so we had – so it was a collaboration between Juarez-Lincoln University and the University of Texas, and we had some of these conferences and lectures at the Art Department and then we also had the opening reception and the opening ceremony at the LBJ Library, the conference room.

So it was very interesting and it was quite an event, and I think that was the first time that Chicanos came together with the Mexican artists, and there was a lot of disharmony between us. There was a sense of sort of like antagonistic or resentment toward each other because I remember at one point we had an evening at my house, and all the artists were there. They were from Mexico and the Chicano artists, and there was a heated discussion about – well, I remember the opening reception at the conference with Pedro Rodriguez and Dr. Jacinto Quirarte and also José Montoya, and José Montoya opened the whole conference with his La Tumba de LBJ, and everybody started laughing. But it was quite an event.

But at one of those evenings, we had a session – like an informal session at my house, and there were – it came to a point where there was so – there was so much disagreement among us because the Mexican artists felt that we had abandoned the mother culture or the mother country, Mexico, by choice. And some of us said well, no, and we were forced to do that because there were no other alternatives. Some of them said well, "We were here when Mexico – when this was part of Mexico, this was part of Spain, and we have been here since that period, so we never abandoned Mexico." "As a matter of fact," I said, "You abandoned us." So then we caused more problems.

But at the end I think that there was an understanding that – and then they also said, you know, things – there was a lot of criticism regarding the development of our work, too, saying that, you know, you call yourself Chicanos, but look at your work. Your work needs development, particularly the murals, that they saw all around town, some of the presentations. They felt our art was not up to par, it wasn't well developed. And some of the arguments were, well, you have to realize that we're the first generation educated in higher education, so this is the first time that we have opportunities to actually study art formally, whereas you have San Carlos Academy of Art that's, what, 300 years old and you have had these opportunities most of your lives and we have not had those opportunities. So you have to understand it.

Then the other criticism is, well, why are you doing Pre-Columbian art? That's not even real art. Why are you

doing that? And so, the argument was well, we have to reclaim the culture, decolonize ourselves, and find where our heritage is because we are so colonized that we have lost the language, we have lost the culture, and so this is a way of reclaiming that heritage that we have lost. And so there was an understanding after that, but it was a very heated discussion between the Chicanos and the Mexican scholars, but it was very, very interesting.

Some of the things that we actually did also is that we also invited 20 artists from San Carlos Academy of Art. And at that time San Carlos Academy of Art was the undergraduate and graduate school of art, but now I understand it is only the graduate school. So at that time, we brought 20 students, and they were mostly undergrad students that came from San Carlos, which is very, very, very nice to have them come to the States. None of them had ever been to the States. There are very few of them who had in the United States. It was very exciting for them and for us to meet and talk to them. So it was a very wonderful experience for us. So that was the first time I think that we had this encounter with the Mexican artists and scholars and the Chicano artists in the United States.

MS. CORDOVA: How did that influence your work?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, one of the consensuses that they felt – and what I'm saying – I'm talking about the Mexican scholars felt that – and they criticized us severely for example, some of our muralists, the figures were not proportionally drawn or proportionally painted, and they felt how come you don't have your perspective right or your proportion right. And we said, "Well, we're just sort of learning how to do this and we don't really have the proper training." And so, a lot of us realized that it probably was best for us to go back to school.

Some of us hadn't finished our undergraduate schooling. For example, Alicia Arredondo, who was a MAS member, Mujeres Artistas del Suroeste. She was one of the members that had very much influence. She was involved with the organization of that particular conference, and Modesta Treviño, who is the wife of José Treviño. And they hadn't finished. They had sort of like dropped out of college and started doing other things, and they realized that that point that maybe they needed to go back to school and finish their degrees.

And I had been out of school for several years as an undergrad student and I decided, you know, it's probably time for me to go back to grad school and do something about this because they're right. We don't have that focus and we don't have that development, and it's not really – maybe we weren't as focused; maybe we weren't as interested. I think now we need to go back and really focus on the craft. So I, too, went back. This happened – this conference was in September of 1979, and we actually – I enrolled and was accepted for the following semester, which was January of 1980. Yes, that's when I went back to school. And so, I actually entered graduate school in January of 1980, and a lot of them that were involved in the conference went back to school to finish their degrees or to seek graduate degrees, and that had a very positive impact on us.

MS. CORDOVA: So the conference actually directly caused your enrollment in graduate school.

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, yes. It actually made us think about our future. What kind of a future do we have if what we think we're producing is appropriate and we're hearing it from the Mexicans that it's not appropriate, that it has no focus, that it's underdeveloped, that it's not up to par, it's not up to standards. So what do we need to do? And a lot of us felt we needed to go back to school.

MS. CORDOVA: And what impact did graduate school have on your art?

MS. BARRAZA: The undergrad school was very mainstream, and at that point, I was aware of the Chicano movement and I was doing a lot of things that dealt with my own heritage, but I had to like tone it down because I was severely criticized in art school for doing that. So I had to be more mainstream, European, Western-thinking in my work, even though at home I would do what I wanted to do and somehow would try to incorporate it in the work. But I had to sort of like tone it down.

When I started graduate school I started doing murals, and it was at that point I think that we were – there was a group of undergraduate students and myself that started doing murals as my graduate work because I felt – I had been influenced by the conference. I wanted to do murals, and so I felt, well, this – I will do this as a graduate student. So I formed my committee and my committee members said that – some of them encouraged me, but I didn't know – I didn't realize how they really felt about me doing murals until about a year later because I started doing the murals, I got a site at a public library. We decided we were going to do – I recruited a group of students that were undergrad students. Marta Sanchez was one of them. Duarte – Firenzio Duarte was another undergrad student that helped me.

MS. CORDOVA: Firenzio Duarte?

MS. BARRAZA: Yeah, he is in Austin and Marta Sanchez is in Philadelphia now, and Sandra Rodriguez, who was from Mexico City. So they were my assistants or they were the crew that were helping me with this project. And we had the drawing done and we presented it to the library and they approved it, but we were going to do

something innovative. We had been exposed to a lot of the contemporary art that was being done. We wanted to do murals, but with a three-dimensional effect. And we didn't want to do frescos, so we decided we were going to do fiberglass murals. So what we decided is that we needed – we didn't know how to do fiberglass murals and nobody in the art department knew how to do that, so we had to go and get the advice outside of the art department and get the funding for it.

So we got the funding. I don't even remember where we got the funding. Maybe it was the women's group. Maybe it was the library. I really don't even remember. No, you know what? We raised the money ourselves. I remember Amado Peña helped us. He had a gallery at that point in Austin and he actually gave us – Amado Peña –

MS. CORDOVA: Which gallery was that?

MS. BARRAZA: El Taller.

MS. CORDOVA: Taller?

MS. BARRAZA: El Taller, that was the name. It was on 6th Street, and he had a studio and a gallery. And I remember that he – I asked him if he would help us raise some money and he was very, very cooperative. So we had an exhibition in his gallery and I asked – from artwork of the students and also some of the faculty members gave me artwork, and we had this opening in his gallery. And the work was sold and the money went for materials – and also the money raised was to hire a consultant to teach us how to do these fiberglass murals.

And so what I did is I went to I think it was called Glasscon [sp] Boat Company, and I don't know if that's correct. Glasston [sp] or Glasscon, I don't even remember. We're talking about 1980. But anyway, it was a boat company, a manufacturer of boats, fiberglass boats there in Austin. And the workers were all Mexican and they were – the majority were women because women could do a lot of detailing. So we hired these women on the weekend to come to the art department and to teach us how to do this fiberglass.

So what we did is we actually took the drawings and we did this big four-by-eight panels out of plaster of paris, and we carved it in three-dimensional. We transferred the cartoons and then we carved everything out or we carved – there was another. I actually have the image. It was a Guadalupana on the corner with her hands praying, and then there was an aloe vera plant, and it was sort of folding and unfolding itself and it was spewing like sperms or something into the air and other sperms were forming into bubbles. There were little fetuses coming out and swirling and flying off into the air. And so that was the painting that we were going to do in the library.

MS. CORDOVA: So it was about birth?

MS. BARRAZA: It was fertility, birth, nature, the elements, earth, plants, nature. We had a pastel drawing of it. That was the one that was approved. And so then we divided it up into a grid system and it was going to be something like – I don't know, it was something like 16 feet long by 24. I don't remember how many panels we had, but each panel was four feet by eight feet. So we had divided the drawing into these panels, and then we did the cartoons. And we actually designed like – it was sort of like a dish, our frame, and then we poured the plaster of paris in there. We transferred the cartoon, and while it was still wet we started carving into it and made it three-dimensional. And then we applied a recess to it, and then these women would come and they would show us how to apply the fiberglass and the resin. We did fiberglass over it, and then we would release it and we would have this three-dimensional mural. Then we would put it together, all the pieces.

We were halfway through the project and I had to meet with my committee. And my committee told me members – and they didn't tell me collectively. Some of them privately told me that the mural that I was doing was not really something that they would accept as a thesis because it was not personal art. It was collective art, and some of the members felt that it was not really art, that it was collective art, collaboration, and it was not art, and that if I wanted to graduate that I was going to have to redo all of my thinking and that I was going to have to do a new body of work. And I said, "Well, I just can't believe it. I mean, murals are accepted in Mexico and through this country, too, and why isn't it?" And they said, "Because that's the way the committee feels and you can challenge them if you want to, but you're going to spend a lot of time doing that. You're not going to finish your project. You may graduate or you may not graduate. Do you want to spend your time challenging them or do you want to graduate?"

So at that point I decided – you know, I had a young daughter, I had a husband. I felt that I had already spent too much time on this project, and if it wasn't going to be accepted I was going to have to start all over again. So at that point I decided okay, I'm going to shift my work and do individual art. And then I even thought well, maybe I can just go and get a Ph.D. in art history. And when I approached the art history department about doing that – because we had an excellent Latin American collection and Latin American art history department – I was told, "We cannot accept you into a Ph.D. program; you have to have a master's. So you need to go back and get a

master's in art history and then you can apply for the Ph.D."

And when I expressed to them that I wanted to do an art history degree in Chicano art, they laughed and they said, "It doesn't exist. This is crazy. You can't get a master's or any type of degree in Chicano art because it doesn't exist." And at that point, it was like they were telling me that I didn't exist, so I felt well, I need to validate myself somehow, validate my culture, or validate what I'm doing, and the only way I can do that is to actually research – do research and validate it scholarly. So I was very much interested. I had been taking some art history courses on indigenous art, and so one of the papers that I had produced was on Curanderismo and Don Pedro Jaramillo. So at that point I decided I –

MS. CORDOVA: Don Pedro?

MS. BARRAZA: Don Pedro Jaramillo, the curandero of South Texas. So I came back home. Of course I had been researching him, and so I started to concentrate more on that and went to his shrine, studied the artwork that was in his shrine, studied the alignment of his jacal [meaning "hut" or "rural housing"] and realized that where they said the water was coming out that he healed from the earth was actually aligned with the cosmos, so I started writing about that. I started studying – I started doing independent interviews with some of my relatives that actually remember stories about him. Some of them remember seeing him. Some of them have parents or grandparents that had been in direct contact with him. So I started interviewing them and finding out all this information about him.

And I started doing research on shamanism, and I found a lot of similarities between what he was doing and shamanism. And at that same time, I was start – I became very interested in dreams because dreams is a very strong element of shamanism, and at that point I started doing artwork based on shamanism or based on dreams. So I was very interested in printmaking because I had been exposed to that as an undergrad student, and I very much liked printmaking. And so I started taking some classes in printmaking with Ken Hale, who is now the head of the art department, and he encouraged me to use my dreams because I would do these monoprints that were very direct memories or sections of my dreams. And then I became very process-oriented, where I would put materials into the ink like bone marrow and blood mill and became very process-oriented and ritualistic-oriented in the creation of these pieces of artwork. And a lot of the dreams are very powerful.

And then at that time my sister became very much ill, mentally ill, my younger sister who was also a student there. When I was there as a grad student, my two younger sisters were students there. They were undergrad. Alicia was studying political science and then Maggie was studying – she had a double major in chemical engineering and computer science. And so they were all there as undergrad students, and Margarita – my youngest sister, Maggie – became very ill or she was beginning to get ill. And she had to drop out of school and remove herself from the classroom because she couldn't think properly. So I started having all these dreams about her, as to how – in my dreams I would dream about how we would heal her and we would get curanderos – I would dream about curanderos coming in, trying to help us heal my sister. And so I used all that ideas and all those dreams in my work. And so my faculty member really liked my work because it was very original – very different. And so, actually – and then I did a lot of drawings, too, and paintings regarding shamanism and curanderismo.

MS. CORDOVA: Had your family practice curanderismo or –

MS. BARRAZA: No. The only thing I remember is my aunt – my father's sister. She practiced it for a while, and I remember going with her to Mexico when I was little or younger – little girl. And I remember waiting in the car while she had these sessions with her teacher or her master. And she did that for a while, but I don't think she does that anymore. And I remember a lot of the rituals, that she would do because of her – the practice. And just recently I was talking to my father about that and he said that – or I don't know how we came because my father is sort of like very fundamentalist. We – what is it, like he's now a reborn Christian, and so he is very much against a lot of the iconography of Christianity. And so he mentioned that he remembers that his mother had some type of talent in curanderismo and that that's how his sister had become interested in it, because of his mother. But I really don't know to what degree if she ever practiced it. I don't remember her practicing any healing, my grandmother, but apparently there was an interest there in the family through my grandmother.

But the only stories I remember – I remember my mother – I mean, in the house we would always have home remedies for mal de ojo [evil eye], for empacho [blocked stomach], you know, a lot of home remedies that my mother would use. And I never questioned it; I just thought it was part of our regular experience. I never thought it was anything different until I moved out of Kingsville. So I think that all of that brought those memories back, of my childhood, some of the things that we practiced and some of the things that I saw around the house. And I became very interested in that, so I started using a lot of that in my work.

MS. CORDOVA: What is your spiritual or religious background?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I was raised as a Catholic and I remember being very religious when I was a young girl

because my parents were very insistent that we all went to church. Every Sunday we went to Catechism classes and we went to – we did everything. I remember at that time you would do Communion I and Communion II. There were two phases. I think you did communion I when you were like six and then you did communion II when you were like a young adult. And so we went through all of that and we were one of the members. They had like the little San Juanitas, which was a church group, and I was involved with the Catholic Youth Organization, the CYO, and my parents were very supportive of that.

MS. CORDOVA: Including your father?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes. My father was sort of like in the background. He would insist that we go, but then they wouldn't go to church. They would just drop us off and we would go to church and then we would walk home or they would pick us up. We lived very close to the church, so I think we would walk to church and walk back home.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you balance that?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I thought that that was how it was. I never questioned it. I thought that that was what it was, that the children were supposed to go to church and the parents would stay home. I just thought that that was the way it was. I thought that was normal. And then my mother would go sometimes, but I hardly remember them going. I remember my father – I don't think I ever remember my father going at that time. My mother would go, but not that often.

MS. CORDOVA: Why did he have such a strong reaction against the church?

MS. BARRAZA: I don't know if it was a strong reaction. I just thought that he was too busy or he was working or – I mean, there seemed to always be some type of excuse that he didn't have the opportunity to go. So I always imagined that it was not that he didn't want to go, but it was that he just didn't have time because he was too busy.

MS. CORDOVA: And your mother?

MS. BARRAZA: My mother would spend her time with my father, so I felt that she was there to help him, to cook for him, whatever. So if they were at home they were busy doing things, and so I never questioned it.

But getting back to your question about spirituality is that I did all of that and I felt that I was probably as religious or I would go to church every Sunday and do all of the things we were supposed to do until I started going to college. And then at that point, I started questioning Catholicism and I started questioning all of that, particularly when I started reading about the conquest of Mexico and [Diego] de Landa and a lot of the things that happened, the atrocities that happened when the priests, the Catholic Church came into the Americas. And a lot of things had happened not only in Mexico, but also in the – Americas, North American continent. When they pushed the Indians to reservations and missionaries and Christianized them. And they took the Native Americans from Arizona and put them in settlement houses in Pennsylvania and retraining them.

And so I was very much – and then of course at this time is when you have the civil rights movement emerging. Everybody was questioning everything. At the Vietnam War we became very politically aware and sensitive to what is going on, and we were very much against symbols of authority and symbols of organized religion and organized associations. So I think that I questioned everything and I realized that the missionaries and the Catholics and the Spanish had destroyed the religion – indigenous religion of Mexico. The knowledge that they had, they destroyed it.

So I felt that that was an injustice done and I started questioning all of that and I started thinking well, maybe there is a way of spirituality through indigenous spirituality instead of European Christianity. So then I started focusing more on the folklore or the spirituality within the folklore in the Mexican America and also the indigenous population of not only this country, but Mexico.

MS. CORDOVA: And so was that also part of the influence on your work in high school?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, yes.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you see that playing out?

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, very much. Like for example, I started using the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a symbol, not of –

MS. CORDOVA: In high school?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, uh-huh. I would do it – for example, I graduated in 1982. In 1980 – even before I graduated, I

think in 1980 or 1981 I had a gallery and a studio in East Austin on 1st Street. And then José Treviño went in with me and we shared the space and we had our studio and a little, small gallery there and had a graphic design business because I also worked as a graphic designer. And when I went back to school, I quit doing that because I really didn't have time. And I would do freelance jobs here and there, but not really working full-time as a graphic designer.

I quit my job right before the conference. I was working full-time, and then after I quit it. I quit the job and I started focusing on the conference. And then after the conference was over I decided to go to graduate school, so I started doing contract work where I would do the work at home and I would deliver the product. And I was able to make some type of income because my husband said you got to bring revenue to the house and you need to take care of the child, and so I was still doing it and going to school.

But getting back to your question about how I used it is at the time that I was in school, I would use some of the imagery in school. As a matter of fact, I tried using the Virgin of Guadalupe when I was in graduate school, and then I – once I had finished I used it more, and I started using her image in the gallery. I think I was one of the first galleries in Austin to organize exhibitions commemorating the Virgin of Guadalupe, and then thereafter I think La Peña, when it was formed, they started doing it. So I had an exhibition called La Peña con – "La Lupe, Con Safo, c/s," and that was an exhibit that I did in the gallery that José Treviño and I had. And I think it was called – Diseño Studios was the name of the gallery. But –

MS. CORDOVA: What year did you open that?

MS. BARRAZA: I was still a grad student. It must have been 1980, maybe 1981, and actually my sister, Frances, was very instrumental in helping me. She gave me the money to do it, you know, to go and give the deposit and to pay the rent for a while and pay my bills. She was very helpful –

MS. CORDOVA: Your sister, Frances?

MS. BARRAZA: Right. She was very instrumental in helping me out. And she would – and not only with money, but she helped me out a lot with my daughter. If I had something to do, if I had a project that was due, she would come and pick up my daughter and take her to her house and take care of her. My daughter would spend the night with her. She was very, very helpful. She would help me a lot also with the conference, and she was always there. I could always depend on her.

She helped a lot, but as far as getting back to the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, I started to use that in my work, but in a very different way. I didn't use it as a sacred icon. It was still sacred, but I used it as a very – as a symbol of empowerment and as a symbol of the ancient goddess Tonatzin. And so I became very interested, like, okay, so we have the Virgin of Guadalupe; how did it happen and what happened here and who were some of the goddesses that the pre-Columbians had? So then I started looking into the past, the ancient history of Mexico.

And then it was at that point when Sandra Rodriguez was working with me on that project that we decided to go to Mexico. We went to Mexico City and went to Tonatzin and the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and we took a field – we actually I think went on the bus or the train. I don't even remember. So there was a group of us that went from Austin to Mexico City, and we spent time with Sandra's family. Sandra was from Mexico City. We spent the night I think with some of her friends or some of her relatives. I think it was some of her relatives. She let us – they let us. They put us up.

As a matter of fact, I think they even spent some time with Guadalupe García, who was one of the students that had come for Conferencia Plástica Chicana with – from San Carlos. She was an older student and she had come with the students, and when we went back to Mexico we called her and I think we spent some time with her. Also Sylvia, I spent time with Sylvia and her boyfriend, later who became her husband.

MS. CORDOVA: Pio [Pulido].

MS. BARRAZA: Pio. And so they – we spent some time with them. And then they would take us around and show us the museums, and so that was the time when I really concentrated on looking on art of Mexico. And then we came back.

But Sandra was very helpful, and when she finished or when she was a grad student – she later became a grad student at the university, finished her degree in art, and married a nuclear physicist and left and went to Germany. So I don't know what has happened to her, but she was a very good artist.

MS. CORDOVA: How much of a presence was the Virgin of Guadalupe in your church as you were growing up?

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, it was very, very, very pervasive. I remember – I was a San Juanita, so they were like the little

girls that were emulates or copies of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and we were supposed to like live her very pattern, a very good life. I don't know how often it was, I think it was once a month or twice a month, we would actually go and we had these little blue capes and we had these little pill boxes of lace, and we put them on our hairs and we would go down the center aisle and go to church. And there was like two or three rows of little San Juanitas with these blue capes, satin capes like the Virgin, and they had white on the inside, and we wore white dresses. And we would go and receive communion and we were supposed to do all these things, you know, that would emulate the goodness of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

So I first became exposed to her through that, and then even – I remember growing up that my aunt had died and my mother claimed that my aunt had tried to come back to take her children, and so she felt that there must be a reason why she's coming back, and she felt that perhaps it was a promise of some kind because she died in childbirth, so maybe there was a promise of some kind that should have been done that she didn't complete, so then my mother at that point remembered going with her and she took to the church a dozen red roses and offered them to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

So – and then I remember that some of the – right during Easter Sunday there were these ceremonies outside the church where they have a copula and they had the Virgin of Guadalupe and I remember going to those ceremonies at that time. So – but everything was very traditional, but it was through my work that I sort of broke away from that tradition and tried to go beyond that so that the Virgin became a symbol of empowerment for myself and for other women, and also a symbol of expression – of ancient expression of spirituality and sacredness. So I attempted to find out who were some of the other goddesses and why does she appear at that site and what were the interpretations that occurred – the indigenous interpretation. And so I started even using her indigenous name in some of my work. Right.

MS. CORDOVA: A couple of times I've heard you talk about your mother perceiving some things as potentially of witchcraft.

MS. BARRAZA: Oh –

MS. CORDOVA: I think you might have mentioned that in one of your essays because – maybe the maguey plant.

MS. BARRAZA: Yeah, it was the maguey plant because I remember when I was in grad school that's when I started using the maguey plant, and so I was doing these large drawings about the big – the size of this wall on backdrop paper. I think it was like eight or 10 feet wide and it was as tall as the wall. Now – and I would gesso them and I would – I started doing these charcoal drawings of maguey plants. And I would talk to my mother on the phone, just to see how she was doing and she and I – she would ask me about what type of work – what was I doing, and I would tell her about the work that I was doing and I once – once I told her I was working on this maguey plant, a charcoal drawing, and she said, "Oh no, no don't do that." And I said, why? She says, "Oh, it's witchcraft." I said, "What do you mean it's witchcraft?" She says, "Oh, during the Mexican Revolution there were no women around so the men would copulate with the maguey plant and then when the growth would come out on the little leaves there were fetuses." And so I thought it was a great – a great folklore concept so I took that idea and I started to actually draw fetuses on the leaves of the maguey plant, but then also like if you look on her – like for example this piece, there's also fetuses – fetuses on the cape – the blue cape of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

MS. CORDOVA: This is your *Nepantla*, right?

MS. BARRAZA: That's a *Nepantla* piece, right.

MS. CORDOVA: And did your mother ever actually believe in witchcraft or was this significant in growing up?

MS. BARRAZA: I think – I think that she believed a lot of things that were handed down to her through, I guess, her neighbors and her father because I remember that – I remember growing up – I grew up on Kenedy Street, and we had a little small house and I remember people coming by to talk to my mother or just to say hello and I remember that this woman would always come by – a very strange person. It was an old woman and my mother would get really scared when she would come and my mother would shut the doors and tell us not to talk and not to look out the window and I remember looking out the window and there was this woman like looking through the window. And I remember when she would leave my mother would run outside and throw water – buckets of water around the windows and she said that this woman was a witch.

And so I remember those stories and I remember other stories that she would tell about her own family, claiming that – I asked her one time because she said that her – part of her father had actually grown up on Kleberg Street by the courthouse and I asked, well, how did you end up here, on King Street. And she said, well, that they had moved – that her father had decided because he was left as a widower – in 1929 I believe is when his wife died at the age of about 20 – I don't know. Late 20s. And so he moved his young family of about seven or eight children to Kingsville and he raised them and I think that he went to live with his mother, who was

Canuta. And they lived in this area on King Street and he lived there with his young children.

And then at one point there was an incident in the family where one of the – a neighbor or a family member – I think it was a distant cousin – I really am not quite sure. I don't remember the story, but there were accusations that my – my mother's older brother had impregnated her and that she was going to have this child, and so the mother came and talked to my grandfather, Espetación, and said that your son will have to marry my daughter. And my grandfather said no. My son did not cause that and he is not the father of that child and there is no way that my son is going to marry your daughter. And so at that point he took the family and moved them and he bought – he bought a little property where – actually the Catholic church is on Kleberg Street. That was his property. He bought it and moved his young family there. And of course it's a young family because my mother was probably a little girl, but her brother was a lot older. He was a young man. I think he must have been like 14, 13, maybe even 15; I don't know.

But my mother and I asked her about that story and I said, well, what happened to that young woman who was pregnant? And she said, "She was real pregnant, like her stomach was bulging, and she said, but once we moved away my father told her – the mother – that he was not going to marry that daughter that the pregnancy went away." And I said, "How is that possible?" And she says, "Well, I think there was witchcraft involved." That they were trying to force my grandfather to have the son marry that girl and that my mother said it – that it was witchcraft and that her father had recognized that and that's why they had left.

So – so I don't know. Those are the kind of stories that she would tell me. I really don't know.

MS. CORDOVA: Did those stories have any impact on your work?

MS. BARRAZA: I think so. I think that this whole notion of the possibility of the will and the mind controlling and destinies and controlling your psychological impact of your future and controlling – to me it's sort of like a way of colonization. Sort of like what we were under, and so it sort of had that sort of a connotation, you know, for me, but it was also very exciting, you know, to sort of have this sort of like magic and transformation and sort of like the dark forces and the positive, and the evil and the ying and the yang, and so all of that seemed very exciting to me and so I was very much enchanted by that and wanted to know more about it and so I would ask her things like, well, whatever happened to that young woman? And she says, "Well, you wouldn't believe it – she says – but she was no longer pregnant," and she said, but then there was another incident in the neighborhood.

She had all these stories to tell me about the neighborhood with the witchcraft and she said that there was a woman across the street – a young girl – mother who had this beautiful young daughter who was very beautiful and that there were a lot of the neighbors envied her and there was a lot of jealousy because she was very beautiful. So she says that one day she got really sick and that she was so sick that she caught some type of infection and she was like – she had diarrhea and that she was constantly going to the bathroom and that she – her stomach was in disorder and that she could never get off of the commode and she was so sick, and that eventually she died. And I said, but what – what do you think was wrong? And she said, well, I think it was witchcraft. I think that the neighbors were so envious of her that they actually killed her. Yeah.

So last night when we saw that owl, I was thinking of that because my mother always said the lechuzas were witches. That's why the hands – we were talking about the hands – they look like animal hands. They look like bird hands.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, we were out last night and we saw an owl –

MS. BARRAZA: Another one?

MS. CORDOVA: No, I'm just sort of giving some context for our evening out last night and seeing an owl that had been hit by a car on the road, struggling. That was very dreamlike. I actually thought about how that might be interpreted in one of your paintings.

MS. BARRAZA: Well, that brought to mind some of the things that my mother had told me. I didn't mention them to you because I didn't want to scare you, but I remember my mother – my mother had all these wonderful stories. She was a great storyteller. A lot of the stories that she would tell us are out of the Bible, but other times she would tell us stories that I guess she had heard in her family.

And she told us this one story about, I think – I don't know what we were talking about. We were talking about birds and owls and my mother was saying, "Oh, no. You have to be very careful an owl" and then she said – she told us a story about somewhere in San Antonio, and I wonder how would she know about that, but then – talking to my father just recently I think that there might have been some truth to it because my father actually claims that he and his father and his family when he was a young boy were actually working in a little town outside of San Antonio, so maybe there is some truth to it.

But anyway, my mother told us this story about how there was this baby in the neighborhood that was always crying and crying and people in the little town speculated that there was something beyond an illness with this little baby and that maybe there was some witchcraft going on. So they summoned this young boy by the name of Juan – well, they say that you have to be a Juan, like the name of the Virgin of Guadalupe, so they got this young boy and at night they – she told me that they actually did a circle – now I don't know if she actually – I don't think she was there. I think she had heard this story where they actually did a circle in the ground and they put him in the center and that at night they saw this –

MS. CORDOVA: At night they saw this?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, at night they saw this bird coming into the house where the little baby was, and so that – I don't know what he said, but there's certain phrases that he has to say. So he said these phrases and that the bird just fell out of the sky and it landed in the center of the circle with Juan and that the bird turned into this woman and it was – she was naked. And she was a very beautiful woman and my mother said she obviously was very wealthy because she had a lot of earrings all over her hands. Beautiful earrings and she had necklaces and a lot of gold and that obviously she was a very wealthy woman and that the people asked her because at that point – she says when you capture a witch that you have the option of killing them and that – or letting them go and that they told her, why are you doing this to the baby, because she was taking blood from the baby. And she said because she was – she had a boyfriend who was doing her some ill so she was returning the evil to the boyfriend and that she needed the baby's blood and that she was from South America and she was coming to this little village outside of San Antonio to get the blood from the baby and that they told her that they were not going to kill her, but that she had to promise never to come back to that village. So they let her go.

So that was a story my mother told me.

MS. CORDOVA: Wow.

MS. BARRAZA: So there were just stories like that that remained with me.

MS. CORDOVA: And she was just from somewhere in South America?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes. I think she actually told me the – the country, but I don't remember. I think it was Argentina or Colombia. I don't remember. I think Colombia sounds more like it.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you ever use this story?

MS. BARRAZA: No, but I used the idea of lechusas. She called them lechuzas, the idea of the transformation and that the nagual and the animal counterpart – so –

MS. CORDOVA: Do you have an animal counterpart?

MS. BARRAZA: I don't know, but I did see the idea like when the dreams that I had of my sister when she was ill – mentally ill – I actually did circles in some of the monoprints with crosses in the center because I think you have to make a cross in the center. So I did the circle because, you know, when – they say that when my – it's also folklore – that when a person is mentally ill that they have soul loss, and so that the soul has been stolen by a demon or an evil force and so I use that concept in my dreams. But in my dreams, I dreamed that that's what had happened, so I used a circle and the crosses – the four cardinal points and the circles.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you see your paintings as offering some form of healing?

MS. BARRAZA: I see them as narrative and I see them as transformative and I see them as reclaiming and I see them as power. For example like this piece here of *La Llorona*, I see him as – I see her image and her body so strong that it sort of like captures you and it sort of like reinstates the strength that a human being can have and the strength is so powerful and the will is so powerful that it can transform you. So I – I like that quality, that people have – or the force of the will and the force of power and I would like to – through my work I attempt to empower women and give them that knowledge that they can be strong and that they are strong and they have this capability and that they should not be subjugated because they have this will and this power to be whatever they want to be.

MS. CORDOVA: Did you grow up with a particular story of *La Llorona*?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I think I grew up with the typical story that everybody has: that if you don't behave yourself that La Llorona is going to come to get you, you know. I remember that and – by the river you'll hear her wailing and crying and so I remember those stories. I think that's got me interested in researching it and looking at the whole idea of the Cihuateteos and using that in my work also as the origin point or the original point of initiation for the folklore of the Llorona.

MS. CORDOVA: And this image of La Llorona is stunning. It's something that I think you've done a couple of times. Is that –

MS. BARRAZA: The Llorona? You know, I got a call from somebody asking me about sending them slides about La Llorona. That they were going to do a paper on La Llorona and that they heard I had a lot of images of La Llorona, and I told them, I don't have that many images of La Llorona. And they said, well, you do. We've heard that you have some images. So I started thinking about how many images I had and one – after that I said, I'm thinking about the images because they said they would call back. I said well I have to call – I have to look at my slides and call me back at such and such day. And they called back and I started counting and I had about 30 or 40-something images of La Llorona, so I – so I said, well, I guess you are right. I do have quite a few. I just didn't realize it until you asked me directly. I did have quite a few images of La Llorona.

But I started *La Llorona* in black and white and then I went into color and then into monoprints and all kinds of imagery. Oil painting – I mean, like this one, I have is also in an oil painting and – and then I started using Cihuateteos or the whole concept of Cihuateteos and retablos. Lloronas they're all painted on retablos of metal and murals on amate paper, you know, so –

MS. CORDOVA: Can you talk about the Cihuateteos a little?

MS. BARRAZA: I became interested in legends and folklore and myths, you know. I guess I became interested because researching the Virgin of Guadalupe the whole story of how she had appeared and how she had created this magic and created this transformation of the roses to grow or this power of the roses to grow and so I was very much enchanted by that and started looking at other myths and legends and when I was told by this one professor that Chicano art didn't exist, I started looking at shamanism and curanderismo and then I just kept going, you know, with things in pre-Columbian Mexico.

For example we have La Virgin de Guadalupe was Zera [ph] goddess of – similar to the Virgin of Guadalupe and so then I found that there was Tonatzin and then there was there another one and there was the grandmother also and then there's – so it just kept going and I kept looking to information regarding her and at one point I saw these beautiful images of – I read about the men when they were – died in battle that when they died their spirits became butterflies if they were warriors and that their spirits were butterflies and that they went to a certain level in the heaven and that's where they dwelled and – and then I also read that a similar situation would occur with women. That when they would die in childbirth that it was the same as being in a battlefield because they were battling for life or death and they lost the battle, so their souls also became warrior souls and then they were allowed to come back a certain time – I think twice during the year, to actually be on Earth and most of the transformative elements were waters or fluid and that they would be seen or heard – bodies of water and that they would torment children because that was the object of their death.

So that whole idea and that – and then I saw these images in Mexico, particularly in Monte Alban in Oaxaca where the – in some of the museums there – the Rufino Tamayo Museum of anthropology where they have Cihuateteos that are crying and also in the anthropology museum in Mexico City I saw them where – there were big ceramic pieces of these women with their hands in the air and they have these tattoos on their face and over their mouth and they're dying, but they're singing about their death as they're giving birth, and so it was a very powerful image.

And then I heard also that in Veracruz there were life-size images of the Cihuateteos and there's some that are called the twin Cihuateteos that are actually on a swing and they were found in Veracruz in an excavation and they're like little babies on a swing, so I was very much enthused by all of those ideas and I started researching that and using that in my way – in my art. And when I did – when I was in Chicago and then I did a residency in California, actually in Saratoga, California, with MACLA [Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana, founded 1989, San Jose, California] – with Gloria Anzaldúa and Tina Guerra and Liliana Wilson [Grez] and myself, and Isabel Juárez. Isabel Juárez and of course Gloria Anzaldúa were the writers and then the rest of us were the visual artists. We worked on this idea of – concept of Nepantla and – and I produced the first Llorona while I was there, but it's one on canvas. It's a lot bigger than this one and it's actually a codice. It has the little boxes on the bottom. Then I did a whole body of work and when I was working on that project – what was I going to tell you? I'm losing my thinking. I was working on that project of the Cihuateteos.

MS. CORDOVA: It was your first La Llorona.

MS. BARRAZA: Yeah, that was my first Llorona. Right.

MS. CORDOVA: That was the mid-90s?

MS. BARRAZA: 1993 or '94. I think it was '93 or '94.

MS. CORDOVA: And that was at Villa Montalvo?

MS. BARRAZA: Villa Montalvo, right. And that was the first Llorona. Actually, it wasn't the first Llorona. I think I had already done it on a retablo with two heads.

MS. CORDOVA: Okay.

MS. BARRAZA: Right. I did a retablo with two heads of La Llorona, but that was like the big one that I did. Oh, I remember what I was going to tell you. When I did that series of work, I also did oil paintings of La Llorona and actually I don't have it. Gloria Anzaldúa has it. It's a big oil painting of La Llorona coming out of the water with La Malinche and other images around her. I don't remember what the other images are, but I had the work in the MACLA gallery and – for the opening.

We all had our work up and for the opening they actually got these concheros to dance and perform and what was very exciting is that my image was bigger than this –twice the size of this, it was hanging on the wall and then I saw the concheros – the women – coming in to dance and they had – they had their faces like with this black stuff over their eyes and over their mouth, which seemed like – and they were dancing in front of my pieces and they were going – they were dancing with fire. And they were going into trance because you could smell the skin burning and it seemed like my images had come alive because they were like coming out of my images, but they were like – you see what I'm saying? Is that they had this black soot on – over their eyes and over their mouth just like my paintings, or my drawings. So it was sort of very transformative for me.

MS. CORDOVA: And – and for you the painting – over the face and mouth represents what exactly?

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, that – those are the symbols of the Cihuateteos.

MS. CORDOVA: You have a number of symbols happening in this piece. Is this charcoal that you use?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, this is charcoal.

MS. CORDOVA: I guess like a couple of things stand out that I see repeated over and over. The heart. La Llorona, the maguey plant. There are some creatures that are to the side. Can you talk a little bit about that?

MS. BARRAZA: Yeah. Right. This actually is my interpretation of La Llorona and she has the exposed heart and I think I became very interested in that when I – because I really – I really love the codices and all the images in the codices. They're very flat. They're very linear. They're very honest. They're very sincere. They're very direct. They're very powerful images, and actually what I should tell you is that when I started working with those images a lot of things happened to me, I think spiritually. I started to have these dreams.

This was when I lived in Pennsylvania and taught at Penn State. I was invited to have a show at Kohler Arts Museum in Sheboygan, Wisconsin ["The Invisible Harvest/La Cosecha Invisble: Codices, Retablos, and Altars Installations, the New works of Santa Barraza and Angel Suarez Rosado," October 1993], and they wanted a whole new body of artwork and I was very busy because I was also teaching, and so what I did is I asked if I could invite another artist to work with me or to exhibit with me and they said yes. And one of the artists I selected was Angel Suarez Rosado who is a santero and he actually has an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York City, but he does a lot of Santeria in his work. So he also lives in Pennsylvania, but he lived in Saylorsburg at that time in Pennsylvania, and I lived of course in University Park, and so we would see each other occasionally to work on the concepts for the show and then we would talk to each other over the phone. And I remember we started producing the work for that show – that I started – I have all these images or all these dreams of – strange dreams and I would call him and I would say, I had this dream and he would say, "Oh, that's because the imagery that you're working with is very powerful, so you're calling it into play."

And so he would sort of like analyze my dreams, and one dream I had was that – I don't know if I talked about it in the book, but one of the dreams that I had was that I was in this little shack – it was this little house – it was so tiny. And the wind; there was like a storm outside and it was blowing so hard and there were cracks in the wood that was holding up the little shack and there were open windows and the doors were closed and the shudders were closed – there were big shutters on the windows that I had closed, but there were cracks and the wind was coming through. And in the dream I was actually inside the little house and I heard a voice from my mother – I heard her voice – and my mother had already been deceased – was already deceased, and I heard her telling me, take those flowers – and there were like red flowers all over the room – and cut the stems and put them around the windows and the door and that will keep the evil spirits out. So that's what I was doing. I was cutting these flowers and putting them around the door – the doorframe and the window frame.

And so I told him about that dream and he says, "That's very interesting," he says, "because I had a similar dream." And I said, "Really, what did you dream?" And he says that he dreamed that he was a little boy and that all these big boys were picking on him and they kept – they kept like pushing him around and – and his grandmother was also deceased and he heard this voice of his grandmother telling him, don't worry. I'm going to take care of you. So then she gave him this big knife, like a big machete, and that he started crying. He says, I

don’t want that. That’s too heavy. It’s too scary. I don’t want that. And she says, oh, don’t worry. I’ll give you something else. So then she gave him – she gave him this white rooster and he took the rooster and put it on the ground and he was – he was a little boy. He has this white rooster and everybody would try to reach for it and the big boys – the little rooster would attack them and would peck them.

And so he says, you see? It’s the same thing. He says, you were cutting the roses – you were cutting the flowers and I had the rooster. So it’s the same idea. He says, that we’re cutting and we’re sort of like breaking ground. And so he was telling me in analyzing the dreams, but he said it was the same concept. And he says, and we’re having these dreams because I’m working with Santeria and you’re working with those images from the codices and they’re very powerful.

MS. CORDOVA: How did you build your knowledge of pre-Columbian art?

MS. BARRAZA: Just by reading, and study. That’s all.

MS. CORDOVA: That’s all?

MS. BARRAZA: That’s all. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: When – when did that become a focal point for you in terms of study? Like, how old were you when you really decided –

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, I was in college. When I was in – I became very interested in that, when I started studying art, because the symbols were so beautiful and they’re so graphic and I was always very graphic, you know. When I started out in printmaking in my undergraduate studies here in Kingsville and also at the University of Texas and then also my background in graphic design – I made a living doing that for a while, and so I was very interested in graphic elements – some type in something that’s very linear, very flat, very colorful. And the – and the codices are that way. They’re very graphic and the prints in Mexico from the Taller de Grafica Popular [The Workshop for Popular Graphic Art, founded in 1937 in Mexico City] are very graphic too, so my work has sort of emulated that quality – a graphic quality. So a lot of – and the codices are that way. There’s no perspective. Images are floating in space.

MS. CORDOVA: What would you say are the most pervasive changes in your work over time?

MS. BARRAZA: I think using color because when I started out my artistic career, everything was graphic in black and white. Black and white – that’s all I used; or monochromatic. And I think part of it was that I wasn’t – I was scared of using color because I really didn’t feel comfortable. I felt like I wasn’t trained how to paint. I felt I wasn’t successful in painting. When I was in school at the University of Texas, I was very enthused about studying, but I was very much sidetracked, as an adolescent. You meet friends, you do party, you do other things, and that sort of like took my time. Not necessarily partying; I didn’t party, but I had a lot of friends that sort of made demands on my time and I think at the time I married and I got involved with the whole concept of marriage and then having children and – and I think that sort of like took me away from my studies and I really didn’t feel that I had the train – the knowledge nor the training to actually do color pieces. I felt intimidated by it. So everything that I did was very graphic. And so everything was very strong and very high contrast, very low-key value, very high-key value: the contrast of the two.

And it wasn’t until after I left undergraduate and had been out and doing graphic design that I started doing a lot of things in color. Particularly in graphic design I would design book covers and they had to be done in color, so I was being forced to do that. And so that’s when I really started enjoying mixing colors and using colors in my work or in graphic design. And then I became very interested in color, so then I started going back into painting and developing that. So I think that my use of color became very strong after I really started experiencing it and doing it on a continuous basis.

MS. CORDOVA: We’ve talked a little bit about the relationship of your work with graphic design, but I also thought you might have some comment about photography –

MS. BARRAZA: Yes. Well, I think when I started my artistic career is – I wanted to see – I didn’t feel comfortable in my artistic capabilities. I felt I couldn’t draw. I felt I couldn’t paint. And I guess that’s because we’re brought up in a society – or at least I was exposed to a society where they always told us that because you’re Mexican or because you’re minority or because you’re poor, you can’t really do what everybody else can do and so I felt inadequate, at that point I felt I wasn’t capable of doing those kind of things and I felt intimidated. And even in the classroom, if you’re a girl you’re always outdone by the men in the classroom or they always pay attention more to them than they pay attention to you and particularly if you’re a female Mexican-American or a black woman or Asian women, that is always the situation, and so I always felt that I was less than. I wasn’t of value. And so because of that, I – what was my frame of thinking? I was going to tell you something. I’m forgetting.

MS. CORDOVA: Photography.

MS. BARRAZA: Photography. Because of that is that – and then I didn't see myself reflected in art history. We would study mainly Western art history and it was – and it was because of that wonderful art history department, at the University of Texas that I was actually exposed to Latin American art and then I had Dr. Jacinto Quirarte in my art history class and then I also studied with Terence Grieder who was my member of my committee who actually had that Ph.D. and he had an MFA in painting and he was an – he was an art historian of Latin American art. He did a lot of excavation in Peru, so he was very knowledgeable of ancient work of Peru and also indigenous art.

And so I sort of like looked up to these people and was very interested in that work, but going into contemporary times I didn't see any Mexican-American art in the books because supposedly we didn't exist. I thought, well, there must be some images somewhere about us, and so I started looking at photographs, looking at magazines, photography books. I was very interested in photography because I did everything in black and white, so it just made sense that I was drawn to photography.

And then while I was a student at the University of Texas, we had some of the leading photographers there. Russell Lee was a professor there. We also had an exhibition of photographs of Minor White and he came and talked to the students, so I was being exposed to that and then I discovered that the university has this wonderful collection of photographs by Casasola and – and I was very much – at that time I was taking a class with Dr. Jorge Bustamante and I was taking a class with Jacinto Quirarte and we were studying about modern Mexico and we were studying about Mexican – the Mexican revolution and the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and I became very enthused about all of that and was doing research on my own, and the only images that I could see of Mexican-Americans was Mexico.

And the images that I actually saw were some of the images of Edward Weston when he lived in Mexico of Mexico and then I saw images of Casasola and I was really much enthused by that. And also Tina Modotti who started photographing a lot of the women – the soldaderas – the women that were in the Mexican revolution. And so I became very excited about Casasola's work and I started to use them because I love his portrayal of women, you know, that were involved with the Mexican revolution and I thought that was a very humble cause, to be involved in the rebuilding of your country and the decolonization of your country and so I very much admired those women that were involved with that. And so I started appropriating some of those images and including it in my own artwork and I started doing monoprints using that. Lithographs – I would do transfer lithographs. So Casasola became like one of my heroes and I started using his "Adelitas" because there was no other photographs.

MS. CORDOVA: The "Adelitas?"

MS. BARRAZA: Right. The "Adelitas" series.

MS. CORDOVA: I'm going to stop our taping right now since we're running out of this one.

MS. BARRAZA: Okay.

MS. CORDOVA: Then we'll restart a new one.

MS. BARRAZA: Okay. That's fine.

MS. CORDOVA: This is Cary Cordova interviewing Santa Barraza. This is session two and it's disc two, still on November 22nd, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

And I've actually just presented Santa with a copy of her thesis, which I'm sure includes some of the slides of her work that she submitted to the University of Texas at Austin, and maybe she can comment a little bit about the work that was submitted for that.

MS. BARRAZA: Yeah. This is the work that I was actually forced to do, which I think was good because – oh, this is falling apart. This is when my sister was very ill and I started to – and I was told by my professors that Chicano art didn't exist and I couldn't do that, and I wanted to really study Latin American art and Chicano art because we had some of the leading scholars there. And I knew that Linda Schele was there and she of course was a painter who had decoded the Mayan glyphs and she was a professor there.

So I wanted to do so many things, but I was so discouraged, and of course I couldn't do everything, so – but some of the – so when I was told I couldn't work with color – that I couldn't do the murals, I started doing these dream images, and a lot of them are for my sister, as I was telling you earlier, who became mentally ill. Like some of these are – oh, this one here, *Remedio – Esperandao un Remedio*, that was – and that's my sister right there, that monoprint.

She – in this dream I dreamed that we were trying to cure her – and it'd be nice if I could get copies of these. I don't even have copies of these. I have some of them, but I don't have all of them. But anyway, I – and the dream is – I dreamed that we had summoned a curandero to come in the room and that my sister – and at that time I saw her as this little girl, because I guess that really was the last time I saw her. Well, I saw her in college – when she was in college, but for me to actually have like a sister-to-sister relationship, the last time that I – I left when I was like 18 to go to the University of Texas in Austin to study and I never came back home. I mean, I would come back periodically, but then I got married, I had my daughter, I had my husband. I lived in Austin for 15 years, and so the last time that I really had a relationship with my daughter's – with my sister and sister and sister was when she was a little girl.

And so in my dream I think that was a reason why I saw her as this little girl. So she's sitting on the floor and in the room in the dream there's a tank of water like an aquarium, and I remember that we had asked this curandero, or I had asked him, to come, and my brother comes in to the room in the dream and he's very upset with me and he says, how dare you bring this curandero here; nobody asked you to do that. You're infringing on the family and this is not acceptable. And he grabbed me and like flung me against the wall – in the dream; this is all in the dream.

And so what I did is I just – I was gasping for air and then he let me go and then we continued with what we had done and we had asked him to actually help us, and in the dream I understood that he was going to take – he had in his hands this effigy that was like a seated, reclining figure who had his hands on his belly and on his belly he had a little black duck and I looked at the black duck and it had like an eye with a star in the center on the belly on the back of the duck and it was like black ceramics, and I understood that he was going to take that, submerge it in the water, but it would be symbolic where the curandero would go to the underworld, look for my sister's lost soul, place it in the little duck that was in the little effigy, and bring it back to the physical plane so that my sister would be balanced again and be a whole person, because her soul had been stolen and was in the underworld. And so that's what I understood in this dream.

And what was very interesting is later when I went to Mexico, this is before – and I went to the ancient archeological sites and the Museum of Anthropology I saw Chacmul, and it was exactly like the one I had in my dream, and in my dream when they put him in the water – because I could see it very clearly – he started spewing this fumes or like this vapor, like hot vapor, from his mouth. And Chacmul, as you know, when they sacrifice the victims they would throw the sacrificed heart down, and had like a little plate on his belly and he would accept the sacrificed hearts. So in a way I felt that my dream was telling me that my sister had been sacrificed somehow – her life had been sacrificed.

And like I told you recently, I had – I saw that little duck and I'd never seen it before until I was just recently in an exhibit of Aztlan that was organized by Virginia Fields and Victor Zamudio at Los Angeles County Art Museum, and I went to the show when it came to Austin to the Austin Art Museum. And I started going to the show – I started viewing the show and it started out with pre-Columbian art; it went to colonial art and then to contemporary art. And in the pre-Columbian art there was the black little duck. It's a pre-Columbian piece, but of course it didn't have the eye that I saw with the star on it. It was like an eye on the star, but it was the black ceramic duck. But I had no idea as to what it meant or what it was used for, but it actually did exist. So that was very interesting.

So these were all from dreams. Not all of them; there's a few that were not, like *Los Dios*, is actually from a photograph, because I used a lot of photographs. I actually retrieved a lot of photographs from the families and I started using them. My grandparents – there's one here with my grandparents and my grandmother, like slide number one, which is *Yo Como Canuta*. That's me myself in the dress and the pose that we have a photograph of my great-grandmother, Canuta, and so I remember that – that photograph and I use it in my work and I also use it – of her son, Espitación Contreras, who was my grandfather and his wife, Andrea López, who actually is – I named my daughter after her.

So I use that – those images, but as you can see I started using color, and the piece that you've seen in the Mexican Museum is all color. It's a Virgin of Guadalupe with a woman praying over a grave and there's a crib and there's a baby that's buried in the ground and you're looking at him with X-ray vision. I actually did that in grad school, or right after grad school, and it's all in color. And so I did go into color, but I was just starting to do it when I was in grad school.

MS. CORDOVA: But you continued with the sort of photography influence. I mean, it seems to me it sort of emerges – I look at a couple of pieces like this where it almost seems like a photo album is coming to life or something like that.

MS. BARRAZA: Well, some are collages. Some are transfers. Some are appropriations. So I went back to my style because I was encouraged to do this. I think when I was told I couldn't do those – the murals – I was very discouraged. And one of my professors told me, just – you know, you really like printmaking. Why don't you just

do some printmaking? Do some monoprints. And that's very fast, and maybe you need to work fast and don't ponder – don't think too much about it. Just do it real fast. So I thought, well, maybe I can do some of the dream images. So that's when I started doing the dream image, and he said they were very powerful so he encouraged me to do that so that's what I did. And that's why I've got this body of work.

MS. CORDOVA: In Shifra's [Goldman] articles she makes a mention of describing the vulture as in some way representative of your experience with your husband. Is that accurate?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes. I guess – I guess it could be interpreted that way. I had this dream, actually, when I had a – had a disagreement with my former husband and I just took my daughter and left, and I went and I stayed in a house with my friend who actually was very supportive of me, because she had told me, if you need anything, you can count on me; just come. So I went to her house and I stayed there for – I don't know how long. Maybe 10 days or something like that.

And I remember the first night that I was there I was sleeping in a bedroom with my daughter and I had this dream where my mother was in the dream, but she was looking at me from around the corner, but I was up above looking down at what was happening in the dream, and in the dream this bird was on my chest. It was black and it was so heavy and I thought my chest – my cavity was going to cave in, and I keep thinking to myself, why doesn't she help me? I need some help. I can't breathe. This thing is so heavy. And my mother never did help me. And I think in a way, because I remember it – a point in my life where I was having these problems and I – and I used to talk to her and she – I told her that I – I wasn't happy, that I wanted to come home, and she said, you can't. She said – [crying] – you wanted to get married; you stay there. So from that point I never bothered her about my personal life. I felt –

MS. CORDOVA: But that was largely why you felt the need to leave Austin?

MS. BARRAZA: Yeah. Yeah. I actually didn't leave until – I think that was in '82; I didn't leave until '85. But I also felt that I couldn't rely on my own family – my biological family – for support. And just – I'd asked her and she said – she said to do the right thing, and the right thing was you stay with your husband and your – you do what you have to do. So from that point on I didn't rely on her for anything; I just relied on my friends.

But you know, it was – it wasn't really her fault. That's the way she was brought up, and so she was just doing what I think was proper for a mother – a mother's expected to say that. And I even remember at points, in that particular relationship when I had left and had gone to Pennsylvania and my former husband would call my mother and say, tell Santa that she needs to come back home – that she needs to come, and my mother would call me and she would say, you go back to your husband, and she was always very supportive of him and I felt very much alienated because I felt that a lot of the problems that were occurring were because of differences in culture and also many things that happened between us that she wasn't aware of and I felt that she – that I couldn't even count on her to support me, so I never did confide in her anymore about my own personal problems.

MS. CORDOVA: That must have been a tremendous sense of loss.

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, I guess it was. Yeah. Yes, it was. It was very difficult, but I had been living in Austin since I was 18, and I couldn't really rely on my parents for any type of assistance because they were so far away and then they really didn't have the resources to help me financially, so I had to rely on myself a lot or on my friends. And so I had actually learned to not rely on anybody.

And that was a trait that I actually passed on to my daughter. That I told her, when – when she was in college that she needed to finish her degree because it was very important that she has some type of education because if things don't ever work out in her life, she has a degree to rely on and that she needs to work for a while so she can get that work experience because you never know what can happen in life.

And so I passed that on to her and encouraged her to work very hard and even to this day, I'm amazed at how she works. And I say, you work so hard and she says, "Well, you taught me to work this way." So I guess I'm to blame for that. But I think it's because I never – I felt that I didn't have the support, although my mother, liked what I was doing after a while. I know at the beginning she told me, you shouldn't go into art because you're not going to be able to make a living being – be a home economics teacher or be a teacher, which eventually I became, you know. But at the beginning I didn't want to do that. But she told me to be a secretary. I think that's one of the things she also told me. And I didn't want to do that. I wanted to do something different, something creative, and so I felt that I really couldn't rely on her for my aspirations, although I admired what she had done and I really was very grateful as to what she had done and I think that she was sort of like the strong person in my family that had actually trained me to be the way I am.

MS. CORDOVA: How did the opportunity to go to Pittsburgh open for you?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I was remembering I had finished my graduate degree in 1982 and – in the summer of 1982 and I was very – I was having a lot of problems with my personal life and at one point I felt, if I don't get out of here – I think I had been – at that point I had been married 13 years and I felt if I don't get out of this situation, I'm just going to die. I mean I felt that way. I'm just going to totally die, and I felt cornered. I felt I didn't have any other alternative. I felt completely helpless, and I felt the only way to get out of the situation is if I leave this town and go somewhere where I have no access to this person – this person has no access to me, and so I told my former husband that I was going to look for a job in higher education. And he says, well, you do whatever you want to do – or he insinuated that and he said – but he also insinuated that he didn't think I could get a job. Nobody's going to hire me. You don't have any experience. You haven't taught. No one's going to hire you. So I said, okay. Well, that's fine. I'm still going to try, so at that point I had my little gallery and I had – I would sell art. I would do graphic design. So I had some type of income, so what I did is I just joined the CAA [College Art Association] and that year they were having a conference in Los Angeles, and so I decided I was going to go to Los Angeles to the CAA and look for a job in their career services, a component of the conference.

What happened is I got so sick. I had a – I couldn't even talk. I had – I had the flu and I had laryngitis. I couldn't even talk, and I had met this woman who is really a dear friend and she had told me, whenever you're in Los Angeles – this year the show was in – that year was in – the conference was in Los Angeles. And she told me, whenever you're in Los Angeles give me a call; you can stay with me. So I gave her a call and she said that she was housekeeping somebody's house and that she had a lot of room and I could go and stay with her. And she picked me up at the airport; it was no problem.

So I actually called her and she picked me up at the airport and I stayed with her and I was like coughing this whole time and I couldn't even talk, and I go to the point where I even started to like throw up in her car. I felt so bad. And she was such a wonderful person. Very understanding, and took me to the conference and I had a few interviews and I was offered a job. And I didn't think that it would come to anything, because I was told that, nobody's going to hire you, right? And then in the mail a few weeks later – a few days later I got this letter from Pittsburgh saying that they would like to offer me a job and would I be interested and that they accept – they actually offered me this job and I thought how can I do it? And they offered me a job in graphic design.

And I though how can I do this? I mean, I'm not even a graphic designer. I've never taught graphic design. I mean, I did it professionally, but I never taught it. And I thought, well, and I pondered a long time and I didn't tell him and I just figured this is my ticket out. If I don't take it now, I'm never going to do it. And so I figured this is how I'm going to – and so I told him that I had been offered a job and that I was going to take the job and he was like shocked, and he says, well, what are you going to do? Are you going to stay there or – and I said, no, I'm just going to go there for nine months. I just have a one-year contract, which wasn't true. The contract was for three years. And I said I'm just going to be there nine months and I'll be back. And that's what I did. And I left and – but I had no intention of coming back.

MS. CORDOVA: And what was Pittsburgh like for you?

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, it was very different, but it was sort of a – it gave me the opportunity that I didn't feel I had. I didn't – I didn't really have the support, with him. So he never supported my art. I remember when we were undergrad students – I mean, I got married and I think I lacked one class to finish my degree and then I had Andrea and so I never really finished my degree and I wanted to go back and finish it and I kept telling him, I need to take this one class to finish my degree and he says, well, we don't have any money. We can't do it. So there's no way I can do it. I don't have the money, so you just can't do it.

So I decided, well I've got to find a way of doing it, so I – so what I did is I got this job where I could actually work at night. I think it was working at the senate. I worked at the senate – capitol senate. I was a graphic artist for the senators and they would give me the jobs and I would take them home and work on them and turn them in and they would pay me. It was contract work. So that's how I was able to do it. And I never told him and I went and enrolled in the class because I had some income coming and so I went and enrolled in the class and took the class and finished and got my degree. And I did tell my mother because, at that time I would converse with her a lot and she was very supportive of me going back to school and so I remember one time we were at her house during Christmas and she said, oh, by the way, did you finish your degree? And he was there and I didn't' want him to know and I said, yes, I finished. And he says, what? You have a degree? And I said, yeah, I finished my degree. But he didn't even know.

And even when I had my MFA show, you know, he wasn't interested in what I was doing. He always told me I had – he had no money, so I had to like finance my own education, so I did. I got part-time jobs, contract work doing graphic design because I could do that very well. And I would do these jobs and turn them in and I would get paid and that's how I financed my school and I got a school loan and, I got small scholarships here and there and that's how I went to school and – because you told me, you have to make some money to pay for the bills in the house and you have to take care of our daughter, so I did. I paid – we divided up the bills; I paid my share of the bills and I took care of our daughter. And so I did that – and so I felt he wasn't really supportive of what I was

doing, so I never – I never told him about, when I was going to finish. I never informed him and I had my MFA show and I figured, he's not interested, so I didn't tell him.

So then one Saturday he got up and left and he came back and he said, "I went to look for your show and it's not up." And I said, "Oh, it's – it was up a month ago. It's now down. It's finished." "Well, why didn't you tell me?" And I said, "Well you didn't – you weren't interested. You didn't ask me." So he didn't even see my show. But that's the way he was, so –

But when I went to Pittsburgh it was very different. It was – it was a Catholic institution where I taught. It was a very small college. It was named La Roche College and it was run by – it was main – in the art department was mainly – you could get a degree in graphic design and you could get a degree in interior design and I believe there was an architecture degree also, but I was in the graphic design component and they were very nice to me and I enjoyed it.

My daughter was going to school there and she liked Pittsburgh. It was different, but at the very beginning she resented me because she felt that I had taken her away from her father and I had taken her away from her friends, so it took her a while to accept that. She wouldn't talk to me for a while and it was very difficult, but after a while she got over it and realized that perhaps this was the best thing for both of us. But she really liked Pittsburgh and when I moved to Penn State she didn't like that at all because she said that – she was used to a big city and Penn State was very small and she never liked Penn State, so when she went away to college, she went to Philadelphia because she wanted to go back to a big city. She didn't like small cities, so it was different.

But they were very supportive of what I was doing. They gave me an exhibition and would support me in any way that they could.

MS. CORDOVA: Which one gave you that – Penn State or –

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, well, no. La Roche gave me a solo exhibit at their gallery and they were supportive and then I got a job at Penn State, so I went to Penn State and that was in 1988, I think, that I went to Penn State. In 1985 I went to Pittsburgh and then in 1988 I went to Penn State and –

MS. CORDOVA: Did your work change as a result of moving to a different part of the country?

MS. BARRAZA: No, it was still very cultural. I think it became more cultural than before. More – more in – I felt a need more to go to Mexico. Like, for example, when I went to Penn State I felt there was a need to go back to Mexico and sort of investigate some of the information that I had been enthused about, and so I actually put together a study-abroad program in Puebla for Penn State. And I went to Puebla and the first year I got a – I got a – I got a – what is it? An educational – it was a – it wasn't a sabbatical, it was – what they did is they had faculty enrichment grant money and I applied for one of those and I got it, and so I went to Puebla and investigated what were the possibilities of getting a study-abroad program there.

And so I did that for one summer and then the next summer I put the program together, so I found out which were the best places and where could we do it. I put the proposal together and it was accepted and then the following year I took students to Puebla to study there and it was very exciting for the students because they had never been to Mexico. And so that was sort of like how I started, tapping back into Mexico.

And then when I went to Chicago, too, there was a lot of interest there in what I was doing in the community. I say in the community because we had the Mexican Fine Arts Center there in Chicago and they were very interested in doing things that were very Mexican. And before I went to Chicago, the last year I was in Pennsylvania I got a Lila Wallace Grant – Reader's Digest grant – and I was able to go to Oaxaca for – for like several months. I think it was three or four months, so I was there living in Oaxaca and painting in Oaxaca. I had a studio in Oaxaca; I met all the Oaxacan artists. And when I was in Puebla, when I had the study-abroad program, I had the opportunity to go to Oaxaca so I had taken the students on a field trip to Oaxaca, so I'd been exposed to Oaxaca and I really liked it and so I felt I need to go back to Oaxaca and study it more and so when I got this Lila Wallace grant, I went to Oaxaca. And part of the program or part of the grant was that you had to find a sister city that you could – when you came back to the United States that they would support you – they would host you. So in Oaxaca I was being hosted by Nancy Mayagoitia, Galleria la – de Art de Oaxaca – and then what I –

MS. CORDOVA: Nancy? What was that?

MS. BARRAZA: Mayagoitia.

MS. CORDOVA: Mayagoitia?

MS. BARRAZA: And then when I went to Oaxaca when I came back to the United States – well, when I got the

grant I had asked – or when I applied for the grant I had asked the Mexican Museum – the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago if I could use them as my host in the United States because I knew I was leaving Penn State – I had already gotten a job in Chicago – and they said, yeah, they would love to host me, so I put down their name. So I got the grant and so I went to Oaxaca and then when I came back I worked with the Mexican Fine Arts Center and we put together some programs in the community that dealt with cultural aspects that I had been exposed to in Oaxaca.

So in a nutshell is that the Northeast gave me the opportunity – the monetary opportunity that I didn't have inn Texas to do this, because there was no way that I would have gotten a job in Austin, because even to this day no one in the art department is a Mexican-American. So we're what? 2004. This is 1982. And so we're talking about – I remember they had hired someone who was I think with a Hispanic surname, but was born and raised in England. So to this day, they don't even have – and what's really ironic and I've said this when I do lectures, is that they would not let me do murals in the art department, but when I came back after I had been a professor at Chicago Art Institute, I was – the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, that I was actually asked to do murals and commissioned by the University of Texas, so that's very ironic that they told me no.

MS. CORDOVA: In San Antonio.

MS. BARRAZA: Right – this is not art. But then they paid me a pretty penny to come and do murals for them in – what – 1996. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: That is pretty funny. What were some of the challenges of that commission?

MS. BARRAZA: Of San Antonio?

MS. CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I had never painted something that large – 43 feet in diameter. That's a big piece. And it was also open to the elements, so it was not enclosed. It was not secured. So you had the moisture. You had – and it was a new building, so I was supposed to start in January of '97 doing the piece on the wall and I couldn't because they were still building it. So there were a lot of architectural problems too. My collaborator was Alice Adams from New York. She was supposed to do the water fountain, which she did, that was underneath.

But we couldn't even – it couldn't be finalized – it took them a while because when she designed it, the architects had not intended that there be a water fountain there, so what they had to do is they had to excavate underneath the floor to put in the lines for the waterlines and it cost a lot of money and it all came out of our budget. So financially there were a lot of problems, because we were not brought in to work with the architects at an early stage of the game. The building was already designed and accepted and being built when we were brought in, so there were a lot of those kinds of problems.

But other than that, what was nice is that also there was a lot of wind and so as far as technical aspects and process we had to cover all the walls because they were already in position. They were actually covered with this flatstone and we had to cover the walls so we wouldn't get any paint on the walls, and we had to cover the floors so we wouldn't get any paint on the floor. So we had to do that every day before we came – put all the plastic up. And then in the morning it was all falling down and we had to put it back up again, so just technical things like that.

But once we started painting it went pretty fast. The only time we could not paint was when it would rain because the walls would sweat and so you couldn't put any moisture – any paint on the walls.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you feel that your art has been influenced by changes in technology at all?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes. I mean, the mural that I did at UTSA is a retablo mural, so here again we're talking about ancient concepts and techniques because it's based on a codice – is actually based on a mystic codice, the concept. But it's actually done on metal, and the wall was curved like a silo so the metal had to be manufactured and had to be curved. And then the paint that I used was DuPont paint for cars, and so it had to be applied with airbrushes and I had to do all kinds of layering of the paint and I had to cover each area and I had to use stencils and I had to use contact paper and I also had to bake the mural like a car. So yes. [Laughter.]

MS. CORDOVA: Bake the mural on the car. That's great.

MS. BARRAZA: Right.

MS. CORDOVA: Was that your first public art commission?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, other than this piece that we had – I had done some murals like – but for myself.

MS. CORDOVA: Right.

MS. BARRAZA: You know, that I have in shows, but as far as public commissions, yeah. And it was very rewarding for me personally because at first, I was very hesitant about using my palette because my palette is very bright and colorful, but the architects told me, no, that's why we hired you. We like your colors and we want you to give us a palette – because they also hired us to actually put together the interior colors of the building. So we actually were instrumental in doing that, and the whole building has a concept. So it actually is a biosciences building that deals with the study of the brain and then there's three floors, so the three floors represents the strata of the earth or the cosmos. So the first floor represents the underworld and the second world represents the physical plane and the third represents the heavens. So the colors are symbolic of that strata of the cosmos.

MS. CORDOVA: That's fascinating.

MS. BARRAZA: So yeah.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah. And then you said a little bit about how – also I think that the relationship between decolonizing the brain –

MS. BARRAZA: Well, actually, the idea was from the ancient codices again. Like Faith Ringgold – I love that video that I show my students of Faith Ringgold where she says, again I stoled art; again I appropriated; again I copied. She's talking about the African influences on her work, or even the Egyptian influences on her work, and she says, again I copied. So I love Faith Ringgold.

But anyway, when I was looking – because they wanted something Hispanic. They wanted something indigenous. They wanted something that dealt with the brain – the diseases of the brain. So what I did is I had to interview all of the scientists that were doing research in that building and what they were doing, and I talked to them extensively, took a lot of notes. And then I started doing my own research, and there is a book that I think is Chicomoztoc, which is the name of the Seven Caves of the Aztecs.

And it is an image that is in the ancient books and it actually looks like a cauliflower. It has seven areas and it represents the seven caves where the Aztecs lived and they came out looking for the promised land when Huitzilopochtli told them – Huitzilopochtli told them that it was time for them to leave and go look for the promised land. And so there's a drawing where they're leaving and they're coming out of these little seven caves. It looks like a tree with seven leaves and it looked just identical to the cross-section of the cerebellum, so I superimposed the cerebellum over the Seven Caves of the Aztecs and I used some of the images that actually deal with that drawing and other images.

And what was interesting was when I was working on that, the scientists would come and they'd say, oh, look, there's a dendrite. It wasn't a dendrite. It was an image from the ancient codices of Mexico. And I said, yes, that's a dendrite, but it wasn't. [Laughter.] And they'd say, oh, look; there's this, and they would give me the names and I'd say, oh yes. But it wasn't. They'd say, oh, look, there's DNA readings, and it wasn't DNA; it's the Ollin symbol. It's like a cross axis with a dot in the center, and they called it DNA readings. So it was interesting how a lot of the symbols that ancient man used were very similar to the images that we have in biology today.

MS. CORDOVA: That's fascinating.

MS. BARRAZA: So that's what I used.

MS. CORDOVA: Yeah, which brings us actually to another question that I wanted to ask you, which is how has maybe reaction to your work changed over time? Have you seen any changes in how people respond to your work?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, after we did that project – immediate reactions is that after we did that project, Alice Adams and I were asked to come back and talk to the students about the project, because they have a lot of public art, and so what they do is they invite the artist to come back and talk to the students. So I remember that after we did our presentation, one young woman – well, she was a nontraditional student – stood up and said that she wanted to let us know that she had been gone from San Antonio for many years and she had come back and decided to come back to school because she never had finished her degree. And she said, when I first walked to campus I was drawn by these colors that were irradiating out of this building, and she said it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

So at first I thought, well, these bright colors are not going to be accepted, because they're very bright. And she said that that's what drew her to the building; those bright colors, so that really made our day.

And then we were actually – we received several awards for that building – for the design of the public art and

the interior design and we were also invited to – by Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York City to present the project, so we went to New York City and presented the project with Henry Muñoz and Alice Adams. So it was a very – very interesting experience for us. We were brought in limousines to come and talk to the Cooper-Hewitt Museum staff and the director of the museum and presented them our project. And then we got an architectural award for the interior design of the building too – a local award from San Antonio.

MS. CORDOVA: Has there ever been a moment in your life when you would reflect and say that you felt like as an artist you had made it?

MS. BARRAZA: No, I don't feel I have made it as an artist. [Laughter.] Because I think one of the things you mentioned earlier was that you were going to ask me about the marketplace of my work, and I don't really think about that. I don't think about doing my art to sell it; I think about doing my art because I need to do it and I need to expose my ideas to other people so that they can see how they can transform society and transform themselves and make a difference in this world, but I don't really see my work as something that I sell, although I do sell work, but that's not the purpose or I don't – and that's why – probably that's one of the reasons why I'm in education is at least I know I'll have an income every month, but I don't really think about selling my work at this point.

MS. CORDOVA: What kind of relationship have you had with dealers over the years?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I had a – I had a gallery representative or art dealer that dealt with my work. His name is Robert Bijou. He's from San Francisco.

MS. CORDOVA: Mm-hmm.

MS. BARRAZA: And he actually sold my work for several – Robert Bijou. B-I-J-O-U. And he actually sold my work for several years, but then that was when I was living in Pennsylvania and then when I moved to Chicago I sort of – I hadn't sent him some work in a while and so I felt that – that maybe I should just find someone local. So I – and then there were some gallery people that expressed interest in my work and I thought I would find someone in the Midwest area to represent me because he was way in California. And first – and then I left Chicago and came back home, so then I never pursued it.

And I know at one point Carmen Lomas Garza had told me that her representative was interested in selling my work, but then I never got back with her, so I just don't think about those things. If somebody likes my work and they approach me then I'll sell it, but I don't really think about that. It's not an issue and I know it should be because we should live off of it, or we should attempt to, but I don't think about that.

MS. CORDOVA: And then I guess the other side is that you have devoted so much time to teaching, and I guess that has played created maybe a problem in trying to do some of your artwork?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes. You're right. You're right, because I actually am the chairperson of the art department and so I have a vision of what I want to do with that department and I spend a lot of time trying to accomplish that. And as a result I have very little time for my work. And also in previous institutions I have always been given a studio to work in, and our institution has not given me a studio or doesn't feel that it's important, or doesn't really value the department, so I have actually struggled to find the resources for the art department – sometimes outside of the art department – and finding creative ways of making things happen.

So as a result I've had to go out and find my own studio. When I first was hired, I actually bought a house and part of the house was my studio, but just recently I decided to just get my own studio space, which is this space that we're seeing. Of course, it's all financed from my own resources and so that makes it a little bit difficult when – they don't really value your scholarship or what you're doing and you're really trying to make a difference.

I've had to do a lot of creative things. When I came, there was no visiting artist program, so I needed to create that because it – we're so isolated. We're in the middle of nowhere and so our students do not go to museums because they don't have access to them, and so I had to provide an opportunity for them, and either we take them to the museums on field trips or we bring the artist to the university. So that's what I've accomplished and – so I write grants every year and I get money so that we can bring visiting artists, or we do other things that are very creative, like we invite them to do a course, have these inner sessions of – some of them are 10 days, some of them are 12 days. So we invite the artist to come and instruct a class and then we find supplementary income to get them to come here, so that's one way of doing things. And so you have to be very creative.

MS. CORDOVA: If you – if you had to choose between teaching and doing your art, what would you do?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I sometimes think it's very frustrating. You wonder why you're even doing education – higher education or any education. I think that I envision that I would like to work until I feel that my department

has accomplished what I want it to do. I have a vision. We're in the cradle of where Chicano art emerged, but yet we haven't done anything with that idea or that concept, and I feel that if it emerged from here it should continue, but it hasn't continued. We have no museums. We have no galleries for it, so I envision that that's what I need to start or that's what I need to initiate or plant the seed. And now we have Nancy Ryan next door who is doing a gallery, is very interested in regional art and very interested in making that happen. And so now I feel that perhaps that will happen, that some good people are in – here in Kingsville.

MS. CORDOVA: And you're opening a gallery right now that we're even sitting in.

MS. BARRAZA: Well, it's not really a gallery. It's a studio space and we are going to have a little exhibition space, but mainly it's a studio space to do our work, and the back part will have a printmaking facility – a fine art printmaking facility, and my colleagues at the university are helping me. They're actually helping me with the space, so it's been a good experience but I feel that this area could – for example, we're developing an MFA in Hispanic Art and our focus will be Chicano art and modern Mexican art and pre-Columbian art and now we're – we've never had an art historian at the university and now we're in the process of hiring a Ph.D. art historian in Chicano art and so I fell that – that with that in place and the MFA in place, we'll attract young artists to come and study here and this could be a very exciting and innovative place to be. And we're isolated in a way but not really that isolated because you can drive two hours and you're in the border. You can drive – you can actually drive to Monterey, which is a center of contemporary art of Mexico, you know, so there are a lot of opportunities.

MS. CORDOVA: In what kind of environment do you work best?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I don't know if the question – if I understand the question. Do you mean –

MS. CORDOVA: I think studio space or –

MS. BARRAZA: Social aspects, or –

MS. CORDOVA: – how do you like to set up a space so that you can be your most creative? What – do you need music? Do you need –

MS. BARRAZA: Yes, I think I do need some type of music. I know when I was in Pennsylvania, I relied a lot on my music from Texas, and when I was in Pennsylvania I had – I used the basement as my studio and – but actually I can create almost anywhere. In Oaxaca I had the luxury of having a studio and – but the problem is that I would have all kinds of people coming and I do need some type of privacy to think and articulate my thoughts. And I usually find myself working late at night till the wee hours of the morning and that's when I can do my best creating because nobody's around and there's no disruptions and there's no distractions, and so that's when I – I feel I can really be creative.

MS. CORDOVA: And this is all part of a project from the Smithsonian to interview you among other Latino artists in Texas. Would you identify yourself as a Latina?

MS. BARRAZA: I think I would identify myself as Chicana more than Latina. And I remember my mother arguing with me when – when I was getting involved with the Chicano art movement, saying that, "Well, you're really Latina." And then I would say, "But mother, we're not from South America or Latin America." She says, "No, but you know, that's what people call us: Latinos." And I was saying, "Well, you know, I think we're really Chicanos". So we would always have this – this conversation, but I think that I would really consider myself a Chicana because I like to be recognized for having a certain ideology about where I stand in this society and this physical place and where I feel that my work should come from, and it comes from this ideology of being Chicano and being in this occupied America and being forced to create this type of work. So I feel that I am Chicana. I don't really feel I am Latina.

MS. CORDOVA: And it was a transition to think of yourself as a Chicana, correct?

MS. BARRAZA: I think that we sort of created the term because prior to that I guess we were called Mexican-Americans, but we wanted to self-identify ourselves and not be identified by the dominant culture. So by self-identification, we labeled ourselves as Chicanos, so I would prefer to be called a Chicana instead of a Latina.

MS. CORDOVA: And do you think your identity as a Chicana has changed over time? Has that sort of been merged –

MS. BARRAZA: Yes. I think that at the beginning we were very much focused on heritage and political activism and civil rights and I think now we're more focused on spirituality, at least in my situation, and I think that at some point it shifted like for the Chicanas to feminism and – for me personally, and then it now seems to be going more towards spirituality and sort of the understanding of the spirit and the integrating of our spirit with the earth and thinking more of as indigenous artists and indigenous philosophy. But I was always interested, I

think, in that spirituality. I just didn't know where I would end up or – but I always had an interest in spirituality and sacredness of the hereafter.

[Audio break.]

MS. CORDOVA: I think of your work Nepantla and sort of the in and out, inside outside, one side, other side, which of course you relate to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa. I'm interested if other writers have had an influence on your work or maybe what kind of influence you feel has emerged from your relationship with Anzaldúa?

MS. BARRAZA: I've known Gloria since we were students because Gloria actually – believe it or not she also – she's from South Texas. She actually is from a little town outside of Edinburg, Texas, and she actually came here to study at this university where she was an undergrad. And then later on – and I never knew her at that time, but I did know her when I was a student at the University of Texas. As a matter of fact, when I was having problems with my former husband she offered her house so I could come and stay there – or her apartment, so I actually spent a few days or a week or so living with her and I brought my daughter with me. She was very supportive of me and very – and gave me some advice and was very – and fed us; made some wonderful meals for us. And so that was my acquaintance with Gloria many, many years ago, and then – and then of course she became this really wonderful writer and I really loved her work. And then we had this opportunity to work together in Nepantla and then thereafter I actually invited her to do a workshop for our students in writing and art and she came to Kingsville and did that for us. So I have this wonderful respect for her – a great respect for Gloria Anzaldúa, and I do – have been influenced by her work a lot because of her very kindred spirit and understanding of women and her interest of empowering them, but there have been other writers.

I'm not necessarily – I'm not a writer, so I'm more involved with feminist – feminist artists and Chicana artists, so if you can ask me something about art, I probably know more about art than I know about writers, but I do like Sandra Cisneros's work also and I really love her, you know, how she sort of like goes in and talks about her very personal experience and how she sees things as a very young woman or a little girl and I really like that perspective because in a way I did that too. I actually use my dreams, I use my inner thoughts, and my inner concepts about myself and my identity and Sandra does that too and so I really enjoy that about her work.

As far as other writers, I really enjoy being with Isabel Juárez who was – she was Mayan and she was part of the Nepantla and what was very unique about her is that she would see us – I know that when we first got there, there were disagreements between us because we had never been together for an extended period of time and we didn't understand each other and I noticed that when I got there the – a sort of some distance between myself and some of the artists, particularly Liliana Wilson and also Tina Guerra, and I just didn't understand that. I think it was because when we had our first meeting we discussed what we were going to do as artists and one of the things that I told them is that we need to do a lot of work, and we were only going to be there six weeks, so we need to produce at least 20 pieces of artwork. And Liliana Wilson says, that's impossible. I can't do that. I only do one piece every two weeks, or something like that. She says it's impossible; I've never done that much work. And I said, Liliana, you can do it. She says, no, I can't do it. And she – and from that moment on she was really mad at me and then I don't know what she told Isabel – I mean, not Isabel, Tina Guerra, and so Tina Guerra like had this sort of like they would be – like they would sort of like distance themselves from me, and later on I realized what had happened is that Liliana told her that I was very demanding and that she couldn't get along with that type of character, but what happened is that – yes, I was very demanding, but what happened is that she produced more than her 20 pieces of artwork in that six weeks and she'd never done that before. And she was very thankful and she says, "I really appreciate what you told me because I now realize I can do it, but I didn't think I could. But I can do it." And so yes, she did it.

And then I think Tina Guerra is that she had this perception that was – she was allowed to stay in the big house – you know, we were in the studios on the side of the property and she was in the main house, and the main house was like this huge mansion, and she was under the impression that everybody lived that way. And I said, "We don't live that way." And so she thought everybody had this wonderful resources and so she was sort of like felt like she was isolated because she actually lived with her boyfriend who was a lot older than her and he seemed to be taking advantage of her and was sort of like jealous of her and so she had all these personal problems and then when she came here she could see that – or she thought that we all had these resources and we didn't, but she had this misunderstanding of who we were. And so it was kind of interesting.

And then Isabel was really wonderful. Isabel could see these sort of like traumas between us and she would write about us. She wrote these beautiful poems about each one of us and dedicated them – and gave us the poem, and I have it somewhere, but she actually talked about us in terms – symbols of animals. So we each had an animal – an animal counterpart and she wrote about us in poetry form about our animal spirit, so it was very beautiful.

And I don't know if you're aware of her work, but she actually is Mayan and she received an award when she was a young woman because of this short story that she wrote, and the short story – she read it to us. It was about –

a story about a tree. That there's this old tree on this property in the forest and he's being cut down and he tells the other trees, I don't understand why they're cutting me down. I have all this knowledge and I have all this information. Why do you think they want to destroy me? And so it's all about the nature and how man overtakes nature and we're not careful about what we're doing and we're destroying knowledge. And so that's what that was all about, so it was a wonderful story. So Isabel is really a wonderful woman and so I really enjoyed meeting her and being with her, so it was a wonderful experience. And I think we also became closer as a result of that experience.

MS. CORDOVA: It's fascinating to hear you discuss that – that relationship of writing and what that means to you, because in looking at some of your work I think – don't you think that you are also writing? You are crafting – as you say, that there is a relationship between your work and narrative.

MS. BARRAZA: Yes.

MS. CORDOVA: Would you describe yourself – you've actually said that you're not a historian or you're not a writer, and yet in some ways you are. Could you respond to that?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I guess I made a decision not to be abstract – to be narrative – because I very much admired the Mexican muralists and I admired what they were trying to do: reconstruct a country, which I felt we were doing that too after the civil rights movement. We were reconstructing an identity and reconstructing ourselves and so I admired that, and what they said was that – they had *El Machete*publication which was their publication to inform everybody what was going on, but they also felt that the murals was one way of actually informing the masses and informing all of them as to what their future was, what their history was, because as you know there was no education or they were practically ignorant at that time and only a few that were in power were able to – they were the ones that were educated and mostly the foreigners, and so they felt that the only way that they could educate the masses was through these murals and so they would do all this extensive research not only about what was going on immediately, but their past history.

And they were the ones that started to appropriate and collect popular art, collect pre-Columbian art, and actually bring it up to a level of fine art and incorporate it in their work, and so in a way I felt that that's what we needed to do too. And all the Chicanos felt that way and that's why we were actually appropriating pre-Columbian art in our work and looking at the murals as a way of doing it because we felt that we need to pattern ourself after what the muralists did in Mexico and also what the muralists did here with the WPA murals, but they were actually patterned after Mexico too, so we wanted to go to the source instead of going to the WPA artists.

And so I felt that what we had to do at that time was to tell the story – tell our real story; not tell the dominant culture's story, but tell the story of what we knew through our own history and a lot of it was folklore – stories that have been told from grandmother to child, to son and daughter, parents to children, so I felt that it was important that I do that in my work. And I think that I have maintained that idea in my work and I feel that abstract art can be very exhilarating and very wonderful, but I think if you do not know the formalist aspects of reading it that sometimes you cannot understand it and I feel that if you're very direct and very, I guess, in a way superficial – very direct about it – you can actually read it and understand it. And you don't have to be a Chicano or a Mexican-American or a black or a minority. Anybody can understand the empowerment of this piece. Anybody can feel the power of that piece. And so I actually prefer to do that than to be an abstract artist or a nonrepresentational artist.

MS. CORDOVA: So in a way, I mean, your work does speak another language from the traditional notions of what it is to be an American mainstream. You're representing the myth – *La Llorona* – colonialism happening in the corner. There is a certain amount of training that's almost required for a viewer to know all the things that you're speaking of – or a cultural background.

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I doubt that my father would be able to identify that as colonial or occupied America, but he understands what the *La Llorona* is. He understands what the heart is. He sees my mother in the cavity – that's my mother when she was a little girl – in the cavity of the ribcage of this woman, and she can identify with that – he can identify with that photograph of my mother. And I actually took that whole idea of an effigy that I saw in anthropology – the Anthropology Museum in Mexico City where they had these effigies or these – where they would actually have – store the organs or the ashes of the deceased member of the family and they had them in the museum and they – and there was usually a ribcage shown with a little hole in between the ribcage and they believed that if you would put turquoise or jade that the essence of the soul of the spirit would come back, and so in a way I sort of put my mother's image there so that whole – her whole essence would come back to this painting.

MS. CORDOVA: And in terms of what your work looks like now or what you most want to focus on, what would that be?

MS. BARRAZA: I think I still want to work with women. I just was involved in an exhibit in Dallas – a women's

museum for Latino Mundo – and I was asked to exhibit some of my work. And they did a video on murals [*Walls that Speak*] and I was very perplexed and I was very amazed at what is still going on. There was a young woman who is a muralist and did a beautiful piece, but she collaborated with these other young men who are young artists and she was only – the only female in the group and in the video, and I didn't get to meet her, but she was in the video and the video I noticed that they would ask her questions about her perception of her work and she would articulate it very eloquently and very intellectually, but she would always turn her face sideways to get approval of her male artists, and I felt, well, you're still in the same situation we were in. So either we need to do something to resurrect this sort of empowerment in women again or this whole notion of what we were doing years ago is going to be gone and we don't have that and we need to do that again.

So I figured – I was talking to my friend Viola Delgado who organized that show ["Mundo Latino: A celebration of Cultures," Women's Museum, Dallas, Texas. September 2003] and I told her, you know, Viola, we need to start together a women's group again so that we can sort of train these young women that are coming up in the ranks about what they need to do and empower them so that they can be self-sustaining and self-sufficient and not really rely on the male counterpart, which is what we have been doing in the past, and it only takes us back to another century, so we need to go to the future and I feel that we're still not where we need to be. And so either I feel that at some point we need to put together a Chicana-Latina museum, not a women's museum because a women's museum – we're not even in that museum. We're not even reflected in that museum, so we have to some type of women's indigenous museum or women – Chicana-Latina indigenous – I don't know what, but we need to do something so that we can actually tell our own history because we're sort of like back in the ranks and it – it happened in the Chicana movement. We were back supporting the men and we never got the recognition that we needed because we were always supporting them, but yet when it came for them to obtain their recognition they never gave us any credit for what we had accomplished.

MS. CORDOVA: Do you feel like you're part of a larger sort of Chicana or Latina community of artists?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes. I think we all know each other. We all know who is doing what in New York, who is doing what in California, the Midwest. We're all – we all know each other, and some of my students are even amazed at that because they see exhibits of particular artists and they say, well, we saw the work of such and such person, like Kathy Vargas; they saw the photographs of Kathy Vargas. And, oh, I remember Kathy when she was a MAS [Mujeres Artistas del Suroeste] member, you know. And they say, really? We didn't know that. What is MAS? They don't even know what MAS is.

MS. CORDOVA: Actually Kathy was a member of MAS?

MS. BARRAZA: Yes. Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah. And she was also a member of – well, she had – she participated in some of our shows, but she actually was a member of Ladrones de la Luz. I don't know if you remember that. And I think that we gave them a show at some point. I don't really remember. I'd have to look in my archives because it's so long ago, but it was a – but I remember her coming to some of the events that we had. I don't know if that's really correct, but I need to look – but I remember Ladrones de la Luz coming and I think they participated in our conference if I'm not mistaken. The Conferencia Plástica Chicana 1979. I think they did, but I'm not quite sure because we were together for 10 years so we did many projects and I don't really recall, but I remember that they were part of something that we put together.

MS. CORDOVA: And so from this community, who do you find inspiration – or maybe I had asked you about writers that you found influential, and then you said – if I'd asked you about visual artists. So I'm curious. I'm going to ask you about visual artists and who you find inspiration from.

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I think that I really admired some of the Afro-American women because of what they have done for their careers, like Faith Ringgold. I mean, I just love Faith Ringgold. She's such down-to-earth – I mean, and she started out her career as an educator. For many years she was an educator in public education and she has this wonderful daughter who's this great writer of black aesthetics, Wallace and – so I really admire her.

And then also Leslie King Hammond, who's an art historian and graduate – I don't know if she still is, she was graduate dean at Maryland Art Institute and she writes beautifully about black art and black aesthetics. And of course we have some really wonderful Chicanas who have done a lot: Amalia Mesa-Bains and Judy Baca – Judy Baca, venturing out and going to study with Siqueiros, you know, in the '70s, and learning all about mural-making and coming back and working in the community and setting up her mural workshop. And she's done so many things, you know; it's just incredible what these women have done.

So yes, there's a lot of women that have done a lot of incredible things. There's also a lot of writers that we haven't recognized like, for example, Marta Cotera. Marta did a lot in the early – in the early '70s, late 1960s. She was very instrumental in opening the road for a lot of us.

But I think that I probably agree with María Herrera-Sobek when she said that women writers or Chicana writers have accomplished more – have obtained recognition more than the visual artists have, which is probably true.

There's very few of us in higher education even though we have MFAs, even though we have Ph.D.s. We may have a teaching position that's non-tenure track, that's a nine-month appointment. I mean, look at Yolanda López. They hired her in Arizona for only nine months, right? I mean, there's a lot of injustices and so I think that if the women were to come together I think that something very powerful could happen.

MS. CORDOVA: Would that be the women visual artists or the women artists – writers?

MS. BARRAZA: Well, let me tell you. When we put together MAS, we actually had intended for it to be literary and visual art and then we found that when we put this organization together, a lot of the men – we started getting funding and a lot of the men wanted to be part of it. And we said, "Well, this is for women." And they said, "Well, why can't we be? We support the women." And so – and then we started having problems with some of the writers, you know, that when we had functions together they would all – they would sort of like do their readings at out art exhibits and they would like sort of control the event and the work wasn't really viewed. We had some incidents like that, so we felt that at that time that probably we needed to just control our own future, which was visual art, so we just focused on visual art.

So I think it can work, but if you look – I personally feel that, you know, as visual – as a visual artist we have – still have a lot to do in the visual art and I feel that we need to come together as visual artists first before we can open it to other avenues because then you're too dispersed. But that's just my own personal feeling.

MS. CORDOVA: And so I think we're probably coming to the end of this and we'll probably close the interview. So maybe you can just talk a little bit about the feeling or the desire to return to Kingsville, coming back here, and what you see for yourself in the future.

MS. BARRAZA: Well, I guess I had the same feeling in Chicago, you know, when I had the feeling that when everything seemed to be falling apart in my own personal life and I felt, you know, I've been here for – I was in Austin for 15 years and I've been with this person for 13 and if I stay here another month or another year, I'm just going to die. I'm just – I just can't – can't continue any longer. And that's the way I felt in Chicago because I was actually invited or I was offered that position because they felt that they needed someone Latina – that they needed someone that could bring in a different viewpoint.

At least that was what I was told, but when I got there I wasn't treated that way. I was treated as an outsider. I was treated as someone different. My work wasn't really valued. They called my work folk art, and there's nothing wrong with that if you sort of appreciated in the same level as fine art, but when I was actually – I went up for tenure and I was told that, well, your art is folk art and why are you doing this folk art and – because when you go up for tenure they actually ask you all these things, and the committee that was reviewing my work came with this general consensus that they could not offer me tenure because they felt that – that the bottom like – the head of the committee said, "We feel that we don't know you." That was the bottom line. And I said, "But that is not the criteria for tenure; the criteria for tenure is exhibition, scholarship, teaching effectiveness, and service to the community and to the university and I feel that I have accomplished all of those." And she says, "Well, you may have accomplished that, but you don't understand that tenure is like marriage and if we don't feel that you fit in, then, it's not a good marriage." And so I was very distraught by what she told me, and so she – actually they sent me a letter and the dean had a meeting with me, which is kind of interesting and she told me, "Well, they felt that they could not give me tenure because that the bottom line was that they felt that they really didn't know me."

And I said, "Well, I'm really offended by that because I was told that I was going to get credit for the years of university teaching that I had at Penn State and elsewhere and now you're telling me that I haven't been here long enough to get tenure." And she said, well basically – that's what she said. And she says, but you know, this was – what was her name? She's the dean now. She's actually a famous writer and I can't even remember her name because I guess I just sort of like cut it out of my mind. Carol – Carol – what is her name? I can't even remember. Carol Becker. Carol Becker is her name and she was the one that encouraged me to come to Chicago.

And so – and then the Mexican Museum wasn't that enthused about Chicano art. They wanted more Mexican nationalism, you know, to the galleries and their museum and were not very supportive of me, and so I felt, this really isn't a future for me. But Carol Becker did tell me – she called me into her office and she said, "Well, the committee – the department committee decides that – that you should probably go up for tenure next year and let's – that they're not going to recommend you for tenure." And I said, "Well, what does that mean?" And she says, "Well, what I suggest to you – she says, I – I – they feel that they don't really know who you are and so." She said, "I felt kind of guilty about that because I didn't – I was so busy, I didn't go around and introduce you to people and do things for you and so that I am prepared to do that –to introduce you to the right kind of people. Introduce you and give you assignments so that you can have – be involved with certain people or committee work or whatever and that I feel that after a year you go up for tenure again, I'm pretty confident you will get it, and I will make an effort to help you out."

And I said, “Well, you know, Carol, I’d like for you to put that in a letter and let me think about it for 30 days or so.” And she says, “Okay.” So she gave me a letter and gave me that letter and – and at that point I felt – I felt that there was an injustice done, so I went to the Equal Employment Opportunity office and I filed a complaint against them. And – and they said that they would investigate it. And then in addition I went and hired a lawyer, and the lawyer said that these were very hard cases, that usually you don’t win, that it’s very hard to prove, and that – and I wanted some advice and I said, what options do I have here? And he said, “Well, it’s very hard to prove and it’s very difficult, but I’ll see what I can do.”

And – and then six weeks later Carol Becker calls me into her office and she says, “I would like to know what you’re going to do, you know, and what did you decide?” And I said, “Well, I decided that I’m leaving and I’m not going to stay here, and her mouth just dropped open.” She says, “But why are you doing that?” And I said, “Because I don’t feel that – you’re right. I don’t belong here and there’s other opportunities for me probably elsewhere.” She says, “Well, do you have a job?” And I said, “No.” I said, “I’m just going to leave and go back to Texas.” So that’s what I did.

I came back home, and at that point I was already working for UTSA. I was doing consulting work, so I had that opportunity. So when I came back to Texas I actually started working more directly with San Antonio, with UTSA, and they actually gave me more of an opportunity to become an equal partner in the resident – in the commission work, which I did. So I concentrated doing that the first year I was here and doing that project, and then after that I was offered a teaching position here and also over there in San Antonio.

So – but I felt the same way at that point. When they told me that and I even talked to some of the other faculty members that had been there longer and they told me that I was being the sacrificial lamb because Carol Becker had to prove herself. She had just gotten that position. She had been associate dean and then they made her dean and she had to prove herself to the other faculty members that she would support them and that she was using me as an example that she could do what they wanted her to do. And so at that point I felt, well, this is really – it’s not a good place for me to be. They don’t really believe in what I’m doing. They don’t care about it and so why should I be here? So that’s why I left.

And actually, it was a good move because once I came back – I had already been asked by Texas A&M University president – had gone up to Chicago and offered me a contract and I had already signed that I would do a book for them [*Santa Barraza, Artist of the Borderlands*. Edited by María Herrera-Sobek, College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2001], so when I came back to Texas I had a whole year to do it, so I produced the book while I was here. I did the commission work, so I was very busy. I wasn’t idle. I really didn’t have like a set job, but I did have a salary. I did have the commission. I did – I was writing the book, and – and actually they did me a favor because if I hadn’t left I wouldn’t have written the book, I wouldn’t have done the commission work, and I wouldn’t have had that opportunity to come back to Kingsville. And then it also other factors were that my father was by himself. My mother had passed away. He can’t read or write and so it was very difficult for him, so I figured this was a time for me to come back home.

MS. CORDOVA: And we’re practically out of tape, so we’ll just leave it at that that you’ve come home and this tape is ending in one minute and it’s fabulous. Thank you so much.

MS. BARRAZA: Oh, you’re welcome.

MS. CORDOVA: I appreciate it.

[End of interview.]