

Chapter 9. Grounded in Community: Four Decades of an Academic Journey

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With others, Yolanda Chávez Leyva paved and followed several paths from her Texas Mexican American origins. Those paths took her across Texas and New Mexico, in different fields of study and work, and ultimately into a new landscape entirely, as a pioneer in Mexican and lesbian community studies, where she engaged in teaching, research and publication, oral histories, community advancement, and museum development. She also raised a family, and her children are now following her paths—and charting their own.

I walked up to Miss Montes' desk at the front of the classroom in 1968. "Can I show you some Egyptian hieroglyphs that I've learned?" I was excited to share them with her, and I felt safe with her. She was the first Mexican American teacher I ever knew—Miss Montes, my sixth grade teacher. She was kind with what must have seemed strange to her: my love of Egypt. She allowed me to write some glyphs on the blackboard and tell the class about them. By sixth grade, I had several inspiring and dedicated teachers, but Miss Montes was different. Seeing her at the front of the class made me feel at home. It was the first time I felt like I truly belonged in school.

By the time I finished Miss Montes' elementary school class, I exceeded the educational level of both my parents. My mother Esther Chávez dropped out of elementary school in sixth grade after the death of her mother in 1927. She was needed at home to help take care of her young siblings. My father Geronimo Leyva dropped out of elementary school in third grade around 1919 to work after his father abandoned the family. My father taught himself to read as an adult.

For the brief time they were in El Paso's public schools, my parents attended what were then called "Mexican schools," the schools south of the tracks where Mexican-origin students made up the vast majority of the student body. Those schools focused on Americanizing Mexican and Mexican American children and turning them into "good" low-paid workers. They were under-resourced and overcrowded. My parents knew nothing of high school or college. The first high school in El Paso's south side didn't open until 1927. They valued my education, but their vision was for me to graduate from high school. Accomplishing that would far exceed the opportunities they had.

When the El Paso school board brought educational consultant Paul Horn to El Paso in the 1920s, he said that there were two separate school systems, one north of the tracks and one south of the tracks. Forty years after he wrote his

report, I lived with the vestiges of both school systems. While my older cousins attended school in the Southside, suffering from the humiliation of the district's long-time "no Spanish" policy, I went to a school north of the tracks in a neighborhood that was slowly changing from white to Mexican American.

In Southside schools, students found speaking Spanish on school grounds were punished by teachers, coaches, and principals—paddled, hit, given "Spanish detention," put under the teacher's desk, and more. In the "American" schools, to the contrary, students were required to take Spanish classes with the justification that they would eventually be the employers of Mexicans and needed to be able to communicate with them.

As I prepared to enter first grade, my parents told me I could no longer speak Spanish because they didn't want me to be punished. In school, I took Spanish classes while at the same time losing Spanish, my first language. This was a linguistic trauma that has stayed with me and that hurt many children in my generation and earlier.

I begin the story of my academic life in the context of my border community. A segregated school system with policies that isolated Spanish-speaking students for generations as well as community efforts to create a more equitable society shaped my world view. I cannot separate my individual story from that of my parents, my community, and our history as Mexican-origin people on the border.

In high school and college, I could never have imagined that I would become a professor of history. I never liked history. My high school history teachers were either detached coaches who were forced to teach history or burned-out teachers who had lost their patience and enthusiasm for teaching. I have no memory of my undergraduate university history professors. History held little meaning for me. I was not a part of it as it was presented.

I excelled in high school, joining many academically focused organizations and working on the school newspaper. I enjoyed my classes although I never felt totally comfortable. Because I was a fast typist and stenographer, even competing at the state level in both, my high school teachers encouraged me to pursue a career in court reporting. They called my parents to tell them this was *the* career for me. It would require my attending court reporter training but not college. My parents were thrilled. College? There was little mention from teachers or counselors that I should attend college as I went through high school, even when I graduated in the top 1 percent.

My high school experienced a tremendous demographic change in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. It transformed from one of the "American schools," schools that were predominantly white to a Chicano high school. A few years before I entered high school, my English teacher, Elroy Bode, wrote "Requiem for a WASP School," in which he discussed the racism inherent in the school system and called for respect for the growing Mexican American student body. His advocacy showed up in the classroom when he assigned Mexican American authors

and encouraged us to write. His consciousness of the changes and the racism in the school system was rare.

My K-12 years were shaped by the long history of exclusion of Mexican American students in the El Paso school district, as well as the lingering legacy of the Ku Klux Klan, which controlled the school system in the early 1920s. My elementary school was renamed Grandview Elementary to Rusk Elementary after Thomas Jefferson Rusk, Secretary of War under the Republic of Texas. Free to do what they wanted while they controlled the school board in the early 1920s, the KKK went on to name other schools after the “heroes” of the Texas Revolution. Ironically, one of those KKK-named schools became an iconic Chicano high school, *la Bowie*.

In 1970, a group of Mexican American parents and their children filed a lawsuit against the El Paso Independent School District. They argued that the school maintained an unconstitutional, dual school system for white students and Mexican-origin students; that monolingual Spanish-speaking students were disproportionately assigned to special education classes; that school teachers were segregated with white teachers sent to white schools and Mexican American teachers sent to Mexican American schools; that Mexican American schools offered an inferior curriculum and had fewer resources than white schools; and more.

In 1976, the court ruled for the parents. It ordered a number of remedies, ranging from increasing the number of air-conditioned classrooms in Mexican American schools to hiring additional qualified bilingual staff.

In my senior year of high school, the school unexpectedly offered a Chicano literature course taught by a teacher who did not have the requisite training. I was excited to have a Chicano-centered class. Over the course of the semester, however, our teacher began to make disparaging remarks: Mexicans are fatalistic. Mexicans have no ambition. She repeated tropes long used to bolster white supremacy and ingrain a feeling of inferiority in Mexican American students. Looking back, I believe the course was the school’s effort to counter the charges of discrimination in the Alvarado case. For students, it achieved the opposite, demonstrating that the schools saw us as inferior.

I did attend college immediately after high school. To my surprise, I was encouraged by my cousin’s girlfriend Billy Jo. I remember the day in their apartment during my senior year in high school when she asked, “Are you going to college when you graduate?” I didn’t know what to answer. I had no plans. I had no guidance. “You should go to UTEP,” she continued. So, I applied and spent my first year at my hometown university, the University of Texas at El Paso, as an undeclared major.

In my second year, I transferred to the University of Texas at Austin—not because of the school’s distinctiveness but because I wanted to get out of El Paso and Austin was then a cool, hippie town still. I had no clue what to study. In high school, I dreamed of being a journalist, but I didn’t know whom to talk to about such a career.

At 19, I declared business my major. As a first-generation student with no knowledge of college or where to go for counsel and advice, majoring in business seemed like a stable future. I did not find the inspiration for what would become my future career as a scholar and academic in my accounting or management classes; rather, my Chicano studies courses led to my discovery of both my past and my future.

Sitting in a 500-student political science class taught by a Chicano professor, I first learned that my family stories were part of history. There are histories that live within families, passed from generation to generation, years before scholars begin to recognize them as History with a capital H.

Growing up on the border with immigrant parents who came to the United States during the Mexican Revolution, my childhood was filled with stories about crossing the international bridge from Mexico to the United States, growing up in the Southside barrios, surviving the Great Depression, the repatriation of family members, and the experiences of living far from the border during World War II.

As a child, I learned to listen intently to these stories, which fascinated me. I didn't understand that they were part of the broader history of the United States, much less the binational history of the United States and Mexico. Nothing in my K-12 education prepared me to understand the place of Mexican Americans in the history of our country. That day in poli sci, the professor talked about the massive repatriation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans that followed the 1931 deportation campaign during Herbert Hoover's administration. I wanted to run out of the classroom and call my parents. "We are part of history," I wanted to yell.

My Chicano studies courses shaped me as a scholar and educator. As a historian devoted to working for and in the community, I learned that much of my work occurs outside the classroom. That includes taking my students into the community, a lesson I learned from one of my professors in Chicano studies early on, Ines Hernández Ávila, then a doctoral student at UT Austin.

During the spring 1978 semester, Professor Hernández Ávila took us to East Austin, a working-class community that included Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants. Drag boat races held yearly on Lake Travis left the neighborhood filled with discarded beer cans and other trash, and terrible noise pollution. Attendees urinated on people's yards, and traffic and parking made the streets undrivable, disrupting life for the people who lived there.

The East Town Lake Citizens Neighborhood Association and the Brown Berets organized protests against the drag races. Our class attended meetings, and, in the summer, we attended the protest. I carried a sign that said, "Keep the trash out of East Austin." In 1978, the police brutally beat one of the organizers, Paul Hernandez. One police officer was suspended for excessive force, and the City Council ended the drag races.

I was involved in the Chicano Movement centered on campus. This included working in the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) and with a group of student allies with the Texas Farmworkers Union. Leaving campus to work in

the community was transformational for me as a student and for my future career as an educator.

In 1977-1978, I took a two-semester class with Professor Hernández Ávila in Chicana literature. The capstone project in the class was to conduct two oral histories. It was my first exposure to the idea of recording and preserving spoken histories. After much begging and coaxing, my parents agreed to be interviewed.

That experience taught me the importance of preserving the histories of everyday people. The oral histories were deposited at the Benson Latin American Collection, one of the most important Latin American libraries in the Americas. In the spring of 1978, we organized a daylong event at Juárez Lincoln University, an alternative institution of higher education that emerged out of the Chicano Movement, just west of the freeway next to East Austin. I gave a short workshop on oral history, not knowing at age 22 that one day I would be director of the Institute of Oral History at UTEP.

In 1980, I entered the MA in economics program. I discovered that this was not a good choice, and I dropped out. In the meantime, having run out of funding, I looked for and got a job with Travis County Emergency Assistance as a receptionist. I felt at home in the office. Our clients were working-class people, mostly women, from Austin's eastside and southside, the Black and Brown parts of the city.

I was promoted to case worker and eventually to supervisor, and then researcher. I spent years listening to the stories of our clients who came to us for financial help with housing, food, and utilities. It was here that I further developed my skills as a deep listener, learning to not just hear but to listen without judgment. This skill became fundamental to my work as an oral historian.

I oversaw the indigent burial program associated with the "paupers' cemetery." I couldn't believe the inhumane system in which I was embedded. A rule of the indigent burial program was that the families could not purchase a headstone, even for the future. The cemetery in East Austin reflected the creativity of working-class families. It was filled with homemade headstones and artificial flowers. Some graves had only a small paper marker with the name of the deceased and date of death. Often they designated homeless people with no one to look after them. The inhumanity of the system and the creativity of the families wanting to honor their loved ones were in stark contrast.

In the evenings, I read about radical social work and analyzed the ways in which my day-to-day work upheld the capitalist system. I thought about returning to school to study social work, but I was too busy seeing clients. I was emotionally and physically drained from listening to their traumas, which I could do little to alleviate. I was frustrated by the system that kept them poor and struggling generation after generation.

At age 30, I decided to move back to my hometown to help my elderly parents. I also decided to return to school. I wanted to study the U.S.-Mexico border

to learn more about my people's history in Mexico and in the United States. I entered the MA in history program at UTEP where I studied both colonial Mexican history and 20th century Mexican American history. I focused especially on the Great Depression, a time that my parents had often talked about. Various branches of my family repatriated, often with devastating consequences, including the death of my teenaged great aunt.

For me, the repatriation of my grandparents in 1931 meant I was born in Ciudad Juárez. We were a classic transnational family. My grandparents married in Juárez, lived in El Paso, had their first children there, and then following their return to Mexico, had more children in Juárez. It was precisely these complex histories of crossing back and forth between the two countries that drew me to studying border history.

After earning my MA, I taught Mexican American history for a semester at UTEP. The demographics then were very different from the current demographics. Now, 84 percent of the student body is Latinx (mostly Mexican American) and more than half are first-generation students. In 1990, there were many fewer Mexican-origin students.

About midway through my first semester teaching at the university level, two young Mexican American women from my class came to see me. They told me that some of the white male students were telling their classmates that they were "going to get" me for what I was teaching. The young women were visibly shaken, teary-eyed. I assured them that nothing would happen, but I feared that something would. Fortunately, it was all talk, but in class the hostility from the white male students was palpable.

I entered the doctoral program in history at the University of Arizona in the fall of 1990. I was nervous and excited. I looked forward to continuing the work I began in the MA program at UTEP. About a third of the way through the first semester, one of my professors asked to speak to me after class. He was a well-known scholar of ethnic history. "There is no such thing as Mexican American history. You should just drop out now." It was a message he directed to me numerous times. Each time my chest tightened, and I couldn't catch my breath. It is a moment frozen in time. I don't remember my response, but it began a painful period in my life. How could we not have a history?

I became a detached doctoral student, more interested in community organizing than socializing with my cohort. I eventually graduated in 1999, two years after accepting a tenure-track position at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). I was the first Mexican American woman to earn a PhD in history at the U of A. People asked if I was proud of that but in reality, I was angry and sad that 105 years after its founding, I was the first.

At UTSA, I found students who were hungry to learn Mexican American history, and I found Chicana and Chicano colleagues who organized to support each other across disciplines. Nevertheless, in my third-year review, elder historian colleagues told me to stop working with the community because it was not

scholarly. I knew immediately that I needed to find a different place, despite my love for my students and other colleagues. The opportunity to return home came when a tenure-track position opened in UTEP's department of history.

In 2001, I began a tenure-track position at UTEP where I had started as a first-year student in 1974. The position was for a public/oral historian who could work with the community and was a borderlands scholar. The department's PhD in borderlands history was just two years old.

It was a perfect position for me. "Study the border on the border" was the program's motto. I began to teach courses on Mexican American history, U.S.-Mexico border history, and public history. I trained myself as a public historian along the way, drawing on my experience working as a historian within communities. My experiences engaging the public with history did not come from formal academic training. Rather, I learned through my social justice work.

Beginning in my PhD program in the 1990s, my passion was to share history with the communities I was working with, especially Mexican American and LGBTQ communities. When I lived in San Antonio, I worked with the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, a grassroots, community-based arts and cultural organization, dedicated to social justice. Their vision inspired me. Their recognition that our lives were intersectional helped move me to action. They understood that knowing our history, recovering our historias, was critical to our movement for social justice. I authored articles for their newsletter, *La Voz de Esperanza*, an opportunity that allowed me to write for a public audience.

In the late-1990s, while still at UTSA, I began to write for the Progressive Media Project (PMP), an initiative of the *Progressive*, which had been founded in 1909 by Senator Robert M. La Follette Sr. of Wisconsin to investigate and fight corporate and political corruption. Through the PMP, I wrote about border issues and Mexican American/ Latinx issues. It was an opportunity to use my training as a historian to put today into context. I wrote about the militarization of the border, the border fence, immigration, and the growing vigilantism against migrants.

It was the first time I received threatening emails aimed at silencing me. One man, on the distant fringe of right-wing politics, wrote that his dream was to shoot every migrant trying to cross the border. Others told me to go back to where I came from.

This was not the last time I received such a violent response to my words, however. On August 3, 2019, a 21-year-old white supremacist came to El Paso with the intention of killing Mexicans. He killed 23 and injured 22. His manifesto addressed the "Hispanic invasion" of the United States and the "cultural replacement" that was occurring.

The community was traumatized. In many ways, we still are. A couple weeks after the massacre, one of my colleagues organized a symposium for UTEP students, faculty, and staff. She invited me to participate, and I spoke about white supremacy. I said directly that Trump was a white supremacist. The backlash was immediate. Students for Trump, a group in Phoenix, called for me to be fired. My

social media and credit cards were hacked, a situation that lasted months. These are common forms of harassment by the extreme right wing.

What created my greatest fear, however, was one post on social media. A frequent contributor to conservative websites wrote this about me: “Not too long ago (she Wouldn’t of had that job in the 1st place) That would have earned her a trip to the nearest Tree.” (Typos and grammatical errors are in the original post.)

I reported this to my university. I received no response from some administrators, a lukewarm response from others, and a strange suggestion from one to take customer service training. Only my students and one colleague, the director of African American studies, gave me the emotional and moral support I so desperately needed. I spent months looking over my shoulder, wondering if one of the anonymous critics was nearby.

Throughout my tenure at UTEP, I continue to invite my students to work outside the classroom, partnering and accompanying community members. In 2006, the City of El Paso announced a new “Downtown Revitalization Plan,” which was greeted with great enthusiasm. Hidden within the plan, created by the city and a group of wealthy and influential businesspeople, was the demolition of 300 acres of the Segundo Barrio, one of the most historic Mexican immigrant neighborhoods in the United States and the place where my maternal family lived when they arrived in the United States.

It was also the center of my research on Mexican American children. A group—including historians, students, activists, and attorneys—founded Paso del Sur, a grassroots group that worked with Segundo Barrio residents to fight the demolition. History was an important part of this struggle.

As we worked in the barrio, residents asked us two important questions: “Why do you care about our barrio if you don’t live here?” Some of us told them that our families had started there and that, as historians, we knew the value of the barrio.

The second question was “What is so important about our barrio?” It was clear that part of our work was to share the history of the barrio with its residents and with the people of El Paso. My students, from undergraduates to doctoral students, quickly put together a chapbook, *El Segundo Barrio: Una historia viviente*, which we distributed to schools, libraries, and residents. Paso del Sur created a historical project, Museo Urbano, placing historic photographs on barrio buildings, so people could see the history. We also worked with Sacred Heart Catholic Church, long the heart of the barrio, and muralist Francisco Delgado to create a mural that told the history of the Segundo. Ultimately, the demolition did not occur, the plan thwarted by the 2008 recession.

My/our dedication to the history of the barrios continued, and, in 2011, David Romo and I opened Museo Urbano, funded by a small grant from the Texas Historical Commission. We rented two small apartments in a historic tenement building that was the first U.S. customs house in El Paso, the Mexican Preparatory School, a boarding house for African American women, a Chinese laundry, and the home to Teresita Urrea, a revolutionary curandera who

was exiled from Mexico in 1898, and Henry Flipper, the first African American graduate of West Point.

The museum featured the history of the Segundo and Teresita Urrea. Cultural workers volunteered to perform there. We commissioned a mural by David Flores of Colectivo Rezizte in Juárez that featured Edmundo Tostado, aka Don Tosti, the first Latino composer to sell a million albums for his 1940s song, “Pachuco Boogie.”

Young men in the barrio asked if they could add their artwork to the tenement courtyard and soon the rock walls were filled with small murals depicting a variety of themes. One mural showed the United Farmworkers Union flag—red, white, and black with an eagle in the middle. One Sunday morning as I swept the courtyard (we did everything ourselves since we had no staff), an older woman walking home from church asked if she could come in to see that mural. As we stood there together, she told me that she had been a member of a farmworkers union in California in the 1950s, and from her wallet she pulled a 60-year-old union member card. History lives everywhere.

Ten years after the plan initially was announced, the City of El Paso declared its intention to demolish El Paso’s oldest neighborhood, Barrio Duranguito, to make way for a multi-purpose entertainment center: in reality, a commercial sports arena.

Again, history and historians played a crucial role in saving the barrio. My interest was the residents, mostly older women on limited incomes who had lived in the neighborhood for decades. They had a tightly knit community. They watched out for each other. They rented apartments in historic buildings that reflected the early history of El Paso, including the “pioneers” of the city, immigrants from all over the globe, the Mexican Revolution, and more.

The buildings, long neglected by the landlords, were falling apart. The residents asked us to help them save their community and to force their landlords to repair the buildings to code. In addition to organizing protests, petitions, and visits to City Council, we studied the history of the barrio.

Just as we employed history to argue for the significance of this barrio, the Council used inaccurate history to argue that it was an insignificant place and, in turn, its destruction would be of no consequence. While the residents were displaced, the buildings remain, and no arena was built. A non-profit, Project Regeneración, is working to rebuild the barrio, including providing affordable housing for those residents who want to return.

In 2015, I became the director of the Institute of Oral History (IOH), founded in 1972 and the foremost depository of border-related interviews in the United States. The seeds planted in 1978 came to fruition 37 years later. At the IOH, we conduct interviews with former Braceros, asylum-seekers, former Chicano activists, and residents in southside barrios. I became lead historian for the only Bracero history museum in the United States and consulted with the Smithsonian on their first Latinx history exhibit. My hope to bring border history out of the classroom and into the community remains at the heart of my scholarly work.

Working with my students in service to the community has been immensely rewarding. In 2019, the El Paso Independent School District decided to close three schools in South Central El Paso, some of them original “Mexican schools.” The students in these schools came from the surrounding Mexican American, immigrant, working-class neighborhoods. In response, Familias Unidas por la Educación, a grassroots organization formed by parents, filed a lawsuit in 2020 against EPISD in the U.S. District Court, Western District of Texas, arguing that this decision violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment of the Constitution as well as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act by discriminating against Mexican American students on the basis of race.

Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid, who represented Familias Unidas, approached me about writing an expert report on the history of Mexican American education in El Paso. I invited my student Angelina Martinez, now with her PhD, to collaborate. Together, we had expertise in this history from the 1880s to the present. We prepared a lengthy report that showed an ongoing pattern of discrimination against Mexican American students in local schools.

When EPISD asked the court for a summary judgment, arguing that Familias Unidas did not have evidence of discrimination, the judge ruled that our report provided ample evidence of a long history of discriminatory behavior against Mexican-origin students. I came full circle: from being a student in this school district to documenting the discriminatory history of the schools to supporting contemporary parents in their fight for the rights of their children.

In August 2024, my daughter Malinalli Leyva defended her dissertation, exactly twenty-five years after I defended mine, becoming the second PhD-holder in our family. Over the last two decades, I have often reflected on my earning a PhD and becoming a full professor. Only 1 percent of Latinas have a doctoral degree. This statistic is both surprising and unsurprising.

The history and contemporary situation of Latine people and, as in my case, Mexican-origin people around education is dismal. Inequitable resources, discrimination, inadequate schools, and even policies that push students out of school continue to be endemic.

My story of becoming one of the 1 percent of full professors who are Latina is not a story of exceptionalism. In many ways, my story is the story of the generations before me and also that of my current students. We continue to be shaped by schools that limit our vision of our futures. And there are educators who see potential in all students just as I see brilliance around me everywhere. Creating an academic experience where students feel nurtured, where they and their communities are recognized, has been at the heart of my work.