

(continued)

Part III Transcribed by Rita Sanchez, July 2012

Richard Griswold: Okay, so you were talking to Randolph Hearst, who is one of the richest men in the United States at that time about . . .

Armando Rodriguez: . . . well, he wasn't the richest; but he was wealthy.

RG: . . .about going and visiting all the schools.

AR: And you know. . . and he had the communication skills and power to alert the Congress that they needed to do something. That was the important part, not the money. It was important that he had the political influence to alert the Congress that they needed to do something about this.

So well, what happened was we got a committee together and then they asked me, "Would you want to head the program?" I said, "No, my job is getting things done, not doing the. . ."

And so they hired—well first of all they had to go through Congress and it got through Congress. And after they got the money they needed, and established and agreed to the program by congressional agreement, they started hiring people. And I wasn't involved in the process of hiring. I didn't want to be responsible for that because . . . first of all, it took somebody who knew the process and I was not trained in that.

RG: But before that, you took Mr. Hearst—did he go with you?

AR: We got on planes. And Mr. Hearst was a big guy. I guess 250 pounds, 6 foot 3, 6 foot something. You know, and it's not easy for him to sit in coach.

But he insisted on going with us. And he rode on coach with us all the way through. He could have been riding first class and it wouldn't have meant anything to him. But we were federal employees and we had to stick with the rules of traveling. It was not a problem. It was not a problem. He went along and became one of us just like anybody else. He stayed in the same hotels that we did; ate at the same places that we did. He became one of us, and everybody appreciated that.

RG: Did he help out eventually?

AR: Oh yes, his foundation funded the program, and later on other programs that I got involved in. He became a supporter of mine until the day he died.

RG: So then you got to know Patty Hearst too.

AR: Oh Yes, I got to know Patty Hearst, and all the family. I used to stay at his house.

RG: And then at some point in your book, you mentioned when Patty got caught up with the Symbionese Liberation Army he called you to help.

Dr. Rodriguez: He called me to help to see where she was. We thought she might be down in Mexico. I checked with my contracts who said she's not down in Mexico. She was some place around San Francisco. And sure enough that's where she was.

RG: So you worked with the EEOC until '83. Then what happened? You retired?

Rodriguez: Well you know, a funny thing. I worked through the Carter administration and then Reagan took over. And I was looking around to see how I could meet my federal retirement requirements. Because in my traditional appointment, I would end up in August, around August, and that would have left me about two months short—two and a half months short—of my federal retirement requirement. But, lo and behold, Regan allowed me to stay an extra two months and a half to fulfill the retirement. And it was a surprise to me.

RG: And did you have a chance to talk to these various presidents. It first started with Johnson, and then Nixon, then Ford—not Ford—but Carter, then Reagan. Did you ever talk to them?

Rodriguez: Yes I talked to him person to person one time.

RG: With who? Who was that?

AR: Reagan. I talked to Carter a lot of times, Johnson a number of times.

RG: Who would you say were the ones that were most supportive?

AR: Johnson and Carter. Reagan did me a favor by allowing me to stay a couple of months to fulfill my federal retirement, but that's all he did.

RG: So then after you retired from there, what happened? You had a consulting firm?

AR: Yes. I didn't have enough time in for social security because California teachers were not in social security in those days. I don't know if they are now or not.

RG: I think public teachers are not; community colleges teachers are not.

AR: San Diego schools were not.

But I had accumulated some—because I worked at Del Mar at the Race Track during the summers—I was always working. I had worked in the fish canneries—so I had some social security. Beatrice had some and she had worked in the airlines—

Christy Rodriguez (Dr. Roriguez's daughter): Convair

AR: Convair-- and she worked at other places and, for strikers, and had some social security, but neither one of us had enough to draw social security. So that's when I formed the company and we both went under social security. And we did that for six or seven years

RG: So you consulted with different organizations that needed expertise?

AR: Uh huh. And it was kind of fun. It was different approaches. But problem solving was always something I was doing anyway. It was continuing on what I had always done, problem solving.

RG I know this isn't in chronological order, but you were involved in the founding of the National Council of La Raza . So tell us a little bit about that organization. That was back in the seventies?

AR: Really, it was kind of Charlie Erikson's and Mike Montez and Phil Montez, who were instigators in L.A., of the National Council of La Raza. They got together a group of people from the L.A. area and invited me to come up and make a presentation on the need for the organizing for the needs of the Spanish Speaking and Mexican Americans and the need to provide programs and a support system to help in the problem solving of employment, admissions, and education.

So they liked the idea and they started forming groups to institute these ideas so that they could have some support system mechanism that they could rely on for assistance. And there was always that need. There were always problems that needed help and people didn't know what to do with it. So this group became a group that provided directions and assistance for solving the needs.

Christy: It was an advocacy program, the Southwest Council

AR: The Southwest Council for La Raza.

RG: And now it's a national organization in Washington, DC. And then also you were involved in founding the Unity League. What was that all about? In 1947?

AR: The Unity League was getting all these groups that were coming up and having them meet quarterly to see how they could provide help to each other. It was a kind of communications organization to be supportive of each other and call upon when needed. Not always would they all agree on everything, but at least they had the opportunity to ask for support.

RG: Were they mostly Latino organizations?

AR: No, it was all across the board. In the beginning it started with Latinos. But became wider because the need was bigger than just Latinos. And when you can get others' support it can make you stronger. That was the interesting part of that. It began to spread.

RG: And then also you were you were involved in the founding of the GI Forum?

AR: Yeah. When I got out of the service. There were a number of us who had just recently been out of the service. And there was no American Legion at that time. And some Texans had organized the G. I. Forum. So we took the concept . . .

RG: Mostly a Latino organization?

AR: Yeah. And it was easy in Texas because a lot of Latinos could get together. And it wasn't that easy in San Diego because we didn't have that many. But as it began to grow in numbers the need began to grow. And we emulated what they did because Hector P. Garcia was the organizer of the American G.I. Forum.

RG: Did you ever meet him?

AR: Yes a number of times. He and I became close, especially in Washington.

RG: And then you were one of the founders of AMAE?

AR: IMAGE

AR: That was kind of to develop leadership in the community, because some of our leaders needed help and they didn't know how to go about it. And so what we did through IMAGE was develop skills in providing services, not only for the organizations, but for individuals in the community. So IMAGE became a place to go to because they could direct you where the help was because they knew what was going on in the community.

So IMAGE became an important go-to place. They didn't do a lot of things, but that was not what they were organized to do. They were organized to direct the persons to get the help that they needed. And it was an important group, extremely important. It was one of the groups that got more women involved than had been the previous practice among Hispanics. Hispanic women did not get involved, but they sure became forerunners later on. And I think IMAGE had a play in this.

RG: What kind of advice would you give to young people? What kind of words of wisdom would you have for the next generation that's coming up?

AR: My advice is if you want to do something and you really care about wanting to do something for yourself and for others, don't hesitate to ask for help and direction. And do it with people who are willing to talk to you about direction and their experiences. You don't have to follow their experiences. It will probably be different; from one generation to the other it's different. But there are enough likenesses in it that you can probably get some benefit from it. But don't be afraid to ask and don't forget to ask. People are willing to help if they really feel that you are sincere in needing this help and will use this help.

RG: What are some of your observations about the Chicano Movement that started in the 1960 and 70s and still has some kind of presence among the younger generation, students and so forth?

AR: I think the present generation is looking for ways of being helpful. And I'm not sure that we as an adult community are giving them much direction in that. And I don't think they are as aware of their needs for the future as we were. Look around and see what it is they need. And you've got to look at it from their needs. And you

have enough experience that their needs can become visible to you as you see them today and what it might be like in the future. And I say, might be, because in life it's always a guessing game what might happen. We have enough experience to predict what's going to happen in the near future—not the long future because the long future is too far away.

If we can just get to the near future, we're on safe ground. And I think that's what we need to focus on. As an adult with a lot of experience how can we help someone be successful and live a good life in the near future.

RG: Now you've lived a long life and been successful in many different arenas? What kinds of influences have shaped you?

AR: If I can be helpful to someone, then I'm helping out not only them, but me. I don't like to take giant steps; I like to take small steps. I'm a small guy and small steps is my mode. And so I look into the future not miles away but yards away.

RG: Well that's good. I think that might be a good way to end this interview here, unless there's something else you'd like to bring up that I haven't covered. Is there anything additional you'd like to bring in?

AR: That's calling for bragging, and I don't like to do that.

Christy Rodriguez: And then the trial that ensued. That whole period of unionization is really only touched on very lightly in the book—but I think it has a major impact in terms of history.

RG: So this was back in the forties? The union cannery workers?

AR: It really started as a family. Catalina, we call her Katie, the anglicized name. Katie was four years older than I. And she and I were always close, my younger brother Carlos too. Katie came here. She was nine years old, maybe ten, and went to school, but was kind of out of step; she wasn't young enough to go through the learning process and she was old enough but hadn't acquired enough English. So the first thing she did was to work at the fish cannery when she got old enough.

CR: She only went to school to the eighth grade.

AR: Just before she went to work at the fish cannery, she went to business school; before that she had gone to junior high. She went to business school and acquired some office learning processes that became very important to her later on. She went to work at the fish cannery. And they were organizing a Fish Cannery Workers Union. And the one who they eventually selected to be the business agent was my sister Catalina. She must have been about nineteen or twenty years old at the time. And she was a tremendous organizer, really good at getting people together and getting them to unite and to take united group action.

She hired my wife to be her secretary. And between them both they raised more cane than you could expect. But they did good. They organized the Union and the

Union became very effective. Eventually it got to her because after five or six years of that, it was more than she could handle and she left and went to do childcare work.

Christy: Wait a minute. I think you're confusing the years. Because I think there was a period when she was organizing the cannery workers and you're confusing the Longshoremen. You're blending the two. Cause Mom didn't work with her until the Longshoreman. Mom was too young at the time.

AR: Yes. Right. Your mom went to work with her after she got into the major union work, after my sister got into the major union work.

CR: But they were brought up on charges. My Aunt Katie, Aunt Katie and you were both brought up on charges for your union work.

AR: Oh yeah.

RG: By the ...

Christy: By the House of --the California House of Un-American Activities.

RG: Tenney, Right?

Christy: They accused you of being communists. They blackballed Aunt Katie.

AR: Yes. They blackballed her

Christy: She just didn't go to L.A. because she wanted to.

Rodriguez: She got blackballed because she was too successful in union activities.

RG: Did she ever meet or did you ever know Luisa Moreno? She was an organizer, communist organizer at the union cannery workers here in San Diego.

AR: AFL-CIO?

RG: Probably the CIO; I don't know; probably CIO.

AR: Maybe she worked with my sister.

RG: She was involved with the cannery workers in the forties and then she was deported because she had joined the communist party back when she was young.

Christy: You were both brought up on charges and then the charges were dropped. They accused you. That's why the FBI, whenever you were going up for presidential appointments, they always came across that.

RG: The Tenney Committee during the fifties. They were witch-hunting. They were looking for communists everywhere.

AR: Yes, they were looking for communists. I was accused of being a communist so many times it wasn't even funny. First of all, I told them, I like money. (laughs).

RG: You mentioned last time you knew Cesar Chavez. I interviewed Cesar before he died. And he had been investigated a lot of times for being a communist too; anytime he had a strike, or walkout, or boycott, they would accuse him of being a communist.

AR: I've been accused so many times it isn't funny.