

INTERVIEW WITH MR. FRANCISCO CORTEZ

conducted by Michael Iles

Interviewer: So what do you know about M.E.C.H.A.?

Mr. Cortez: Well, about MECHA. It's an acronym for Muvimientos Estudental Chicano de Aslan, which started back in 19- I'm not quite sure- '67 or '68 in California by Hispanic college students, who wanted to empower high school Hispanic students to go into higher education. And the club spread and its national, and its been national for some time. And they mentor and assist high school students into believing and accepting that they are able and capable of going into higher education. I was an advisor for MECHA a few years ago and I put together, here at Century. I put together a national conference, where we had close to two thousand from all the way from Guam to New York and California. It was an all day conference. It took me three and a half volunteer months of working which was close to a year. We had it here at Century. It was very productive. We had entertainment, keynote speakers, students, classes, and seminars. That's about as much as I know about MECHA, although to end that subject was that we had a transfer of a staff member come to our school here, from another school a few years ago. That person went about dismantling all of this. Took funds out of the club account, claimed that MECHA was one sided, was for Mexican Americans, and that it was not a good club to have. That person insured that the club went down the drain, and so I backed out.

Interviewer: So you don't have MECHA anymore?

Mr. Cortez: No. They have something else I think they call Latinos sin fronteras. In MECHA what I was doing was trying to integrate. Not just Hispanics and people of color, but also Anglo's into the MECHA program to build that bridge, and that was not acceptable to this individual, that was in a position of power.

Interviewer: Have you done anything else to help to help Hispanic students?

Mr. Cortez: I put together an Azteca soccer club to participate in an off-season. A soccer league for kids who academically or physically were not able to compete and make it into the school level-type soccer. It's a program, which is a very good program. It assists students in having something better to do than to sit on the sidelines wondering why they are not able to play, or get into trouble. I did that for some time and in that program too the funds were taken and all kinds of things were done with it so then I backed out of that. I was break dancing advisor. I've been with the district going on fourteen years and I put in more volunteer hours than the forty that they pay me. But then along comes somebody and decides that its either them or nothing. And now its nothing, now I basically don't do anything unless I get paid for it.

Interviewer: Don't they still have the Azteca Soccer team?

Mr. Cortez: They have the team. I don't know if they are still using the website, I was going to register the name, because I created it. But if they still have the name though,

more power to them. The team is still there. What had happened was I had supplied equipment. When I started coaching for Century, it contradicted my contract to continue doing that. So I found a parent and loaned an x amount of equipment and then I almost had to take this person to jail and to court to get this stuff back and funds. When it was all said and done I got my nets all torn up, and I think four or five balls out of fifteen, that I had lent out. And finally I decided that it just wasn't worth fighting and pushing and shoving to volunteer to do stuff. It got pretty abusive.

Interviewer: What methods are usually used to transition Hispanic students into the mainstream classes.

Mr. Cortez: What methods do I use or the ESL program because there are two different entities.

Interviewer: You in particular

Mr. Cortez: Me? I believe in immersion. I believe that students need to acclimate, and just immerse themselves into the language and the culture as soon as possible, with minimal assistance. To me the human being is so apt to being able to change, to survive. So that if you allow a human being to immerse themselves they will pick it up faster. Which is why the Asian kids tend to assimilate a lot faster into the English culture because we don't have ESL teachers that are Vietnamese speaking, or aides, and so they've got nothing to hold them down, and they acclimate real quick and exit out of the ESL program and they succeed. Well that's basically what we are shooting for, but the program itself promotes that the students stay in the ESL program for x amount of years. To me it's an insult because it's like saying that Hispanics aren't as smart as Asians. You know it's just not true, it's just the circumstances are different. All people are equally smart, given the right tools. I've seen kids that have been four, five, or six years in ESL. Sometimes I ask them, well, you need to get out of ESL, because there is no ESL in college. You can't go to Oregon State and say I want the ESL program. Basically they are being set up to drop off after high school. I tried to immerse them myself, and I've gotten in trouble for it, and I'm outspoken. I just couldn't live with myself if I did some of the things I've seen being done for the purpose of keeping kids in the numbered quota for federal funding. A lot of people don't understand that Liberty and Century High school came from the funding from these federal grants for ESL kids. I mean I could go on and on, but basically that's about the size of it. I believe the best way for an ESL student is, yes they should have someone there prepared to translate if need be, but only in an emergency. They should be allowed to be in the program no more than two to three years. There's a summer migrant program, I don't know if you've ever heard of that. Well the summer migrant program was a good idea in the beginning. Actually my older brother back in the 60's or 70's... There's a gentleman that retired last year, his name is Henry Wiens(?), he was the head of special education for the district. He and my brother were of the group together the proposals and stuff for these programs, and they weren't meant to be done they are right now. Instead of assisting its like the old welfare system, its hindered the ability for them to advance. I've had kids tell me that they

don't want pass classes, because then they won't qualify to go to the summer migrant program, where they field trips to the Zoo, they have concerts, they have dances, parties. And these kids are like "are you crazy Cortez, I'm not going to get out of this program, I'm going to stay in ESL because I'm going to migrant school this summer. So you know, it's an incentive to fail, to me, the way I look at it. But I'm here to do my job and help you guys succeed.

Interviewer: So how long do they keep the Students in ESL

Mr. Cortez: It depends on how long they can closet them. There's another thing. There's a lot of across the board stereo-typing. Just because a guy is Pedro Gomez he is automatically ESL until he can prove that he can't even speak Spanish.

Interviewer: So there is no written law that says how long students are to be kept in ESL?

Mr. Cortez: I don't know if there is or isn't but I don't think that even if there is that it's followed, you know. Because some of our Hispanic students have four or five names. They might start off in the ESL program being Juan, and three years down the road they become Manuel. The funding and the numbers are still there.

Interviewer: So what do the parents think about this?

Mr. Cortez: The parents unfortunately are too busy working and trying to keep their family alive just to get the basic staples of life. And obviously they are also uneducated. They don't know how them and their kids are being used for financial reasons in my opinion. The only time you could get a parent to come is if you have a raffle and you give away a microwave or something, something to gain. But it has nothing to do with the kids advancement, because they're not into the academic part of it. A lot of the parents assume that it is our responsibility. It's the school districts responsibility to teach their kids and they don't need to do anything about it, it's always somebody else's responsibility. So the kids don't get the support. As long as they don't hear about it and there are no problems, their kid can be in ESL the rest of their life.

Interviewer: What about the students, what do they tell you?

Mr. Cortez: The students that wake up and smell the roses finally, that finally realize that what I am saying is a good thing and not a bad thing, right now usually are in colleges. I run into the summer time when they come home. I saw a kid last night, I won't mention names, but he's going for basketball tryouts for Oregon State that went here. Now this was not an ESL kid, it was an African American, but this kid was meant to be going into McLaren Prison. By the way I am a juvenile counselor for the county, part time. That's how I make up the difference financially. So I see kids doing that and they realize that it's a cool thing to immerse themselves and get top grades and be treated equally. Fail or succeed. Kids are proud, they don't want to be given the answer to pass a test so certain levels of education or some teacher or administrator looks good, so they keep getting

funding. These kids wake up, but then there's always kids that end up at the gas station, you know and flipping burgers, who have been out of school already for three or four years. I run into them all the time. They stayed in the ESL program, and are still trying to sneak into the summer migrant program in the summer, to go party.

Interviewer: What issues do you see that occur frequently among Hispanic students

Mr. Cortez: The lack of sexual education and parental responsibility after they've made the mistake. The fact of getting a girl pregnant. The fact that the culture still continues to practice the quincieneta, really ruins a lot of the girls. I think we have a bout a quarter Hispanic population. If you go to the nursery, you've got seventy-five per cent of the babies are Hispanic. So what does that tell you? Sex education is not there. Its not just the kids, or the staff that;s not supplying it. Its the fact that there's no parental support. They turn fifteen and they have this quincieneta. I don't know if you're familiar with it, but the quincieneta is literally taking your daughter, dressing her up like a virgin bride. Inviting all the community, all the bachelors, come over here, my daughter is ready to procreate. Am I that dumb that I would do that with my daughter? No.

Interviewer: Is it always at the age of fifteen though?

Mr. Cortez: Yes, that's why it's called quincieneta. Quince means fifteen. It's like sweet sixteen here. But when you have a sweet sixteen party here you have kids that are around your age that go to the party. You don't have men show up, up to 40, 50 years old, manhandling your daughter. There's a big percentage, and people don't like to hear it, but there's a big percentage of these girls that end up pregnant or run away with these adult guys who by our laws are perverts because they are messing with minor, but that's not enforced either buy the law. They end pregnant or gone and out of school. Then they're left with the kids. And then we are always left with a negative. You know the Aztecs quit crucifying virgins. Can you imagine? Oh, its culture, but would they still be doing that? This is a silly thing. The reason this quincieneta thing was brought into play to begin with outside the fact of the Catholic festival of having a party-fiesta, dress her like a bride, was because back in those days women died young, and they had to have babies at a certain age. Also to unite the family, and have compadres, and comares, and padrinos, they could help each other out in bad times. So then they would say, okay, well my daughter is ready little town, come on check her out. But this is the year 2004 and they're still practicing this, which is the downfall of our Hispanic women, a major downfall. And the guys don't feel that the sex laws apply to them, because they're not enforced on them. If you went down the hall and whistled, don't you think you would be in the office in a heartbeat? But if a Hispanic does this, it's overlooked. And grown men do it to little girls. Its sexual harassment. As long as we allow them to not be educated in the current laws or rules of life, they're going to fail.

Interviewer: Have problems always been this way in your experience of teaching?

Mr. Cortez: Not just teaching, I've been a Tejano Mexican American all my life, I'm 47. I quit going to Mexican dances when I realized that everytime there was a dance they would rent building that only held 700 by fire chief standards and they sold 1200 tickets. You know, there were fights and all this stuff and I just got away from all that stuff. Its just a lot of stuff that I wish my culture would grow up. But as long as they're allowed to do it and we're allowed to do it, and continue not succeeding, we're not going to succeed. We're going to have our little girls pushing baby cribs with little girls in them, or little boys.

Interviewer: What improvements could be made to help students?

Mr. Cortez: I think a massive push on sex education, civic law, and accountability. A major bust. To me I call any man who preys upon any girl under eighteen years old, and this person is over eighteen years old, is a pervert, by our laws and our civil standards here. I don't care where they come from or who taught them what. I mean just because a certain race or religion or culture says that they're allowed to beat up their women. We cant let them do that, they're in America. Women have every right that a man has here. So why should we do it for anybody. You know what I mean? Accountability is the major issue, and make them accountable for their actions, and the responsibilities. Teach them the laws and the rules. Don't allow ignorance to be an excuse for failure. If they say that I didn't know that because its in English, well then write it in Spanish for them. You know, bring it down town and let them know. You know, accountability.

Interviewer: what do you think is the greatest obstacle for Hispanic students trying to further their education?

Mr. Cortez: I can put it all in one word. Leniency. That's the greatest obstacle that Hispanic students have is leniency. And that's the leniency that's given to them by this society, this educational system. Because everybody is like oh they're Mexican. They don't know any better, or that's their culture, and that's bogus.

Interviewer: So what programs are there currently in place to address the needs of Hispanic students in a better way?

Mr. Cortez: Right now, MECHA is one of them, because it's all about education. But then along come people who are nationals, and happen to get into position, and because they're not Mexican American, they ruin it. They build this wall, it's either this or nothing. But this MECHA club thing is all about education, it's not a negative. It's not allowed in this school anymore because it did not fit with what this person felt it should be like

Interviewer: Are there any other programs?

Mr. Cortez: Oh there's plenty of programs. We've gotten done with our gang stuff, we don't have too much of it anymore because we got on it. And there's a lot of good stuff

going on. I would say outreach. We need to have people that can teach the kids about safe sex, about abstinence in their languages so there's no excuse for failure. We have one quarter Hispanics, and how many people are bilingual as far as counselors are concerned. You know what I'm saying? It's got to reflect. If it's one quarter Vietnamese, we should have one quarter Vietnamese speaking staff. Because they're getting funding for it. Not pretends or wannabe's people that actually know what they're doing. So that we don't have this high rate of pregnancy, and little girls having babies.

Interviewer: What tactics or strategies are best used for education.

Mr. Cortez: Education consistency and no leniency. Across the board everybody needs to be responsible.

Interviewer: Do you think these programs have a future?

Mr. Cortez: you know if there's a club here, it can't hurt, hopefully, you know what I mean? But I don't believe in segregation. I don't believe that in the name of having my own club I'm going to segregate the kids from everybody else. It's like the break dancing club. Break dancing doesn't matter what color, society or shape you are. Well a lot of people who aren't Mexican eat a lot of Mexican food, so what's the trip, you know? You have music or whatever. One time I was the Asian, MECHA, break dancing, and skateboarding advisor. All four. And what were they? They were clubs that the typical staff member would have nothing to do with. And these kids came and asked. Not that I supported it or believed in what they were doing, but they needed somebody to be there. Other wise they couldn't have their clubs. So in doing so you get penalized by other staff, mistreated, and then you get dogged. You got to be totally stupid to go fight and argue with somebody about volunteering to work.

Interviewer: What are the reasons for changing programs?

Mr. Cortez: Political Correctness. If somebody comes up with something that is working, if it's not PC, it's going to get dogged. There's a lot of that hob nobbing PC stuff going on because people are constantly pushing and shoving trying to climb to the top so called ladder of whatever that is.

Interviewer: Would MECHA be an example of this?

Mr. Cortez: Well MECHA is gone because of this, because of someone's opinion of what PC is. And MECHA's gone, that doesn't mean it can't come back, but I'm not going to do it, because I've already been burnt there. That's why I took my part time job at night, just to keep myself busy because I'm an activist. Only now I'm getting paid to do the work that I typically would.

Interviewer: To what extent have you been able to work with the parents of Hispanic students?

Mr. Cortez: Through the juvenile department, a big extent. But the juvenile department mind you, when I'm at that level, these kids have already screwed up. I'm trying to fix them and I get to meet with their parents. Here I'm put into a position because of my openness where I'm out of sigh, out of mind, and low profile. Which to me is OK. If that's what they want to do then that's fine. I do whatever needs to get done.

Interviewer: If you have the need to contact a Hispanic parent, is it hard for you to do so?

Mr. Cortez: Not for me, no. Unless somehow a person says it wasn't your responsibility, it was a teacher's responsibility to call or to do this or that. Well the teacher's not bilingual. The teacher asked me to do it. I've had occasions where my supervisor says what were you doing calling? Well yeah so and so told me to call for him. And I have to defend my actions. Too much cut throat going on. It's too much people fighting here to help. If we're really here to help the kids let's help the kids. We don't have to like each other. Let's just help the kids.

Interviewer: Do you find that Hispanic parents are willing to work with you to help their children?

Mr. Cortez: I think the will is there but the ability... It's just like any parent, but the ability to do so because they're so preoccupied in working and making a living stops them. And plus the majority are non educated. We haven't reached a generation of parents yet that has gone to college. We're not going to at this rate because the majority of Hispanics are not following through to higher education I'm not trying to fly my own flag here but that's what MECHA does, and it got booted out because of a person's opinion of what was PC and what wasn't. At the expense of the kids, it wasn't for them, it was for the kids. It just happens so much. For the sake of PC, diversity, or whatever we throw away so much to gain so little. And it's just silly.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would tell me about past experiences?

Mr. Cortez: Well I attended this district. When I was a kid I went to school. I started at Farmington View when I was little kid. I lived in labor camps in Washington county for five years. Been to every labor camp there was, picked for every major farmer, volunteered for Vietnam. I've got adopted kids. I've got everything from dark to white kids. Different races. I have seven total. Four boys, three girls. Grandkids. Been involved in this community for as long time. Trained at boxing gyms. I used maintain a black belt in taekwondo. I would teach kids to keep them off the streets, that's when I was working in construction. Always doing something to try to better the La Raca, you know, try to get them caught up and always being pushed back. This district has come a long way. From being spanked at Poynter junior high for speaking Spanish on my lunch hours, or just because I was accused by Johnny smith, and sent over to the principle to get whacked to now where I'm sitting here actually talking about it. The truth is that they're asking. At least they're looking into and they're bettering and we have programs. Now it's overkill,

let's give them what they want, leave them in the dark, as long as we keep sending the numbers in and keep getting our funding. It's not going to work for long. There are some kids that are making it to college, and are coming back lawyers, so watch out.

Interviewer: Do you think it's better in today's district then when you were a kid?

Mr. Cortez: I'm actually proud of this district right now. When this happened to me this was a minor thing, this getting spanked and stuff, here's all kinds of atrocities. We used to have to walk the alleys, because we couldn't walk on the main street because they would throw open cans of food at us. That was the bigotry's. Back in my day we did not fight for streets, we fought for dignity, for equality. We rumbled with rednecks and bikers, we were kids and they were adults. We did all kinds of stuff to try to be equal. Public pools that were open for kids and they wouldn't allow us, we would rumble. Drive up in our '57 Chevrolet's and let's go for it. We weren't all Mexican either. There was Anglo's with us. We've always been tight. It's nothing to do with that, it's the bigots, the ignorance. When I started at this district I actually had to go work with the coach at Poynter that use to give me the hacks. It was pretty nerve-racking for me. I never did say anything to him or anybody there about it. We've come a long way, and hopefully we will keep going a long way.

Interviewer: Do you know anything about the Walk-outs in LA back in the 70's?

Mr. Cortez: Well that's where MECHA came from, those kids were involved with Caesar Chavez back then, right after JFK got shot. The settings were Ghandi type issues. Ghandi was one of Chavez's heroes, and he felt the same way as Ghandi did, and they were great men. That kind of rubbed off on a lot of us thank God otherwise we would have been dead or in prison. Which actually there's a lot of us who are. We have educators now, we have people in high office, we are the second biggest voting block in this country. Only we're not a block yet, and that's where we're heading next. I'm involved in the Democratic Political Party. I've educated one year over seven hundred Hispanics and registered them on how to use machines. But those machines and they're being used against the Democratic parties.

Interviewer: Have you ever protested?

Mr. Cortez: I got to march with Caesar Chavez up in Hillsboro where that Safeway use to be. The one on First Street. The Gen X store where they sell clothes. All that used to be Safeway. During the grape and the lettuce boycott we went down 1st street there. I actually met Caesar Chavez at Mount Angel when I was a kid. My brothers Arturo and Ricardo went to Colejio Caesar Chavez, which was the monastery up there on Mount Angel, donated by the monks who christened it Colejio Caesar Chavez. He came up to christen it and that's when I met him. I was standing in the crowd looking around for the tallest man I could find, a John Wayne kind of looking guy, and this guy walked up and we turned up to be the same size, and I was a little boy. He was a short man. I've been all over, I can't remember them all. From Michigan, a hurricane took our home in Texas, we

hit the road. We did not have insurance on our farm. We lived in labor camps for seven years, five of them here. And I remember traveling in the dark from Michigan this way, and the only reason was because we couldn't be seen. Back then there was Asians, Blacks, and Winos in the labor camps, not just Mexicans.

Interviewer: Why did you choose to teach in this district?

Mr. Cortez: Because it's my hometown. When I was gone in the military I swore to myself that if I ever got back over here I was going to try top pay back, in a positive way, not negative, in a in your face we can do it. Kids don't need to be treated this way. No matter who they are. I just can not stand inequality. I can't stand people who treat people bad. Even my worst enemy. I hate to say this. I believe if Hitler and I saw him being jumped by three or four dudes, just out of being a human I would jump in to back him up. Not because I believe in his beliefs, but because I'm a human, you know, and it's not cool for people to be treated like that. And it still exists only it's covered. But we're heading the right way. How many people now look at us old fogy's and say I'm never going to be like that, I'm never going to got trough that kind of stuff. You walk down the hallway, you got a rainbow walking around. It was not the same when I was a kid. We cleaned that up now. Now if anything negative is happening is between the races themselves.

Interviewer: Well thanks for your time