Oral History Transcript
John Broesamle Suddenly a Giant: A History of CSUN Collection
Interviewee Jorge Garcia = JG
Interviewed by John Broesamle = JB
Interview conducted on May 9, 1990 at an unspecified location
Transcribed by: Joseph Piellucci
Edited by: Philip Walsh
Time: 02:03:38

Biographical Note:

Dr. Jorge Garcia was born in 1943 and raised in the San Joaquin Valley. Growing up, he worked in agriculture with his family, and then attended California State University Fresno, where he earned his BA. While working towards his MA in Political Science, he was hired to teach for the Chicano Studies Department at San Fernando Valley State College. He began working towards his PhD at University of California, Riverside, while simultaneously teaching at CSUN. In 1981 he left CSUN to work on his dissertation and make money working on the family farm in the San Joaquin Valley. He returned to CSUN in 1984, earned his PhD in 1986, and was later selected as Dean of the School of the Humanities, becoming the first Mexican American to hold that position. He was instrumental in the creation of a bridge program that made it possible for students who might not otherwise have attended college to do so.

Interview Transcription

Tape 1, side A

JB: You arrived in 1970 and the Chicano Studies department was new at that point, how were you recruited into it?

JG: Well the department was about a year and a half old at that time and I had—in terms of recruitment I had probably recruited myself into it, because I was up at Fresno State with La Raza studies, I had been in the Master's program in political science involved as a graduate student uh—actually first as an undergraduate, then I was a graduate student in a variety of things that—the Chicanos on campus, like here, at San Fernando Valley State were going through almost an annual change in names, it would be Mexican-American Student Association one year, then United Mexican-American Students the next year, Mexican Student Association, and we were going through those kinds of changes too, and just to finish that line off, they ultimately settled in on MEChA [Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán], it's been MEChA for a good twenty years. But I was a student on a—in the days of student involvement, we had three faculty, none of them in La Raza studies or ethnic studies, and two of us as graduate students were selected to be the student input on the hiring committee, and we spent a good deal of time in summer or spring of '68—you don't mind if I back up to—

JB: No.

(00:01:30)

JG:—because it'll fit in—um, interviewing people for the new—it was an ethnic studies department with a La Raza studies or Chicano studies section, a Black studies section, and Native American Studies section, and we were trying to find faculty, and we were interviewing, and we had like four positions to fill—four full time positions to fill in La Raza studies, we had agreement on two, and the other two it seemed like were just endless interviews and we weren't getting the people we wanted. And one day, the three faculty members said, Why don't the two of you apply? And we said, What do you mean? We're students. They said, No no no, we think the two of you ought to apply. And we had a meeting, and we said, Wait a minute, you're not supposed to meet without us, there's a five person committee, who were probably going to say no. They said, No, they had lunch, and they figured that the two of us would make good hires for the last two positions, and that's how I, well trying to finish off a master's degree in Political Science at Fresno State ended up starting teaching with the La Raza studies at Fresno State. And then we went into a whole series of conflicts with the institution uh—on a variety of issues. With La Raza studies, the main conflict was that on the first Wednesday of every month we would take our classes—we wouldn't cancel, we would meet at the Fresno County Courthouse, the old courthouse park, and there was about a five mile march out and down Blackstone [Avenue] to the Safeway headquarters, because in 1968, Safeway was the boycott target of the United Farmworkers—or National Farmworker's Association soon to become United Farmworkers, and we supported that, and our contention was that if the state funded university had an entire school of agriculture with a department of viticulture that worked with agribusiness, that there ought to be some component of the university—a publicly funded university that supported farmworkers, and that was La Raza studies. And so we were actively engaged in that, and so the first Wednesday, all of our classes did not meet in the classroom, we all were on the march. That created a certain amount of problems for us, a lot of agribusiness and business interests in Fresno were applying pressure on the institution but the issue that really brought everything to a head, was that the Black studies section had selected—Marvin Jackman, who at that time was known as Marvin X, a Black Muslim, playwright, poet, to teach a creative writing course. And at that time Marvin was under indictment for failure to respond to the Selective Service; he said he wouldn't go. So that—there were elements in the Fresno community that objected to—I still remember the strange terminology, Hasidic(??) citizenship. (both laugh) And, of course our position was, the man is qualified to teach and we had a—you may have remembered Dale Burtner from the old UPC [United Professors of California] days, well he was our dean, kind of dean of the letters and science stuff, he was a chemistry prof and so he was our dean, and he basically said that if the department feels that this individual was qualified to teach, and he was a published playwright and poet and so on, to teach a creative writing course, it seemed to us that it was so we'd had a big faculty

meeting of the sections and decided that we would all back the Black studies and we ultimately went to the chancellor's office with Glenn Dumke in a closed-door meeting, a couple of them, and Dumke—I got to represent La Raza studies, Dumke basically came down to a position and said, "Look, there is pressure on me from local legislators in Fresno, from the Fresno community, from the trustee who was from the Fresno community, and the trustees have a policy that no separatist may teach in the CSUC, he is a separatist therefore he will not teach." I don't remember who the attorney was, but the attorney present said, "Chancellor, you can't do that, this man is following his religious convictions, his—" and Dumke just told the lawyer, "You're here to back me up, if you're not, be quiet." And so he asked Frederick Ness who was president, not to hire Marvin X, and the president couldn't deal with it, so he turned to the vice president, a wonderful Quaker gentleman by the name of Walker, and said—the academic VP said, "Would you please stop that, not forward that recommendation to me." And he said, "I can't, because I don't have academic grounds." And so they turned to Dale Burtner and said, Would you stop it, and he says, "I don't have academic grounds, and as far as I'm concerned the department has the same kind of autonomy within the system that any department would have, they've determined the person is competent, they have presented documentation, so I won't stop the hire." And so Dumke says, "You people are going to go back to Fresno, but if that man teaches, I will impeach you," he pointed to Frederick Ness, "You, Walker; you, Burtner; and all that department." Everybody just sat there, finally Burtner was the one who spoke up and said, "Impeach? What do you mean impeach?" and Dumke says, "Well, I don't mean in a strict legal sense, I'm trying to convey a message." And Burtner says, "We got the message." So we went back, and we talked it over, President Ness pleading with us not to put forward the nomination for hiring, and we wouldn't—we wouldn't withdraw—because we voted, we would go all the way. And that put us on a collision course because they ultimately—there was an injunction against the department from hiring Marvin X and what happened is that the entire—we weren't fired because none of us were tenured, but we all got notices in the spring (unintelligible) I'm really compressing it, I mean we could spend the rest of the afternoon just talking about those days, or what I can remember of them. But all of us got notices saying that we weren't going to be hired next year, the following year. And that's when the campus blew up, when the marches—well there were marches, but this started becoming a daily thing and then ultimately the computer center was fire bombed. And now at that point we had all decided we were going to stay and fight it, and we would form some kind of unit off campus, and I got an interesting call at one point from the vice president, Norman Baxter, who later became the president, and he asked me to come over, and I still remember the interesting conversation that we had, because he said that he—that they had some problems, they wanted some legitimacy and continuity to the program, that he checked around campus and I was the one in La Raza studies who was the least objectionable. So that he was offering me the job as coordinator of the La Raza studies section; if salary was a problem we could talk. And he wanted me to come back in for the following fall. So we had a faculty meeting, it turns out they had offered one of the Black faculty members the same kind of thing, one person come back in, so we vowed to a joint position, both of us would go back and

said, Yes, we'll take it under one condition, and that condition will be complete autonomy in hiring, and that we would announce ahead of time we would rehire everybody, so obviously that wasn't going to work. In the meantime, another personal development is that I had gotten to know—I'd met—I got to know my wife, well she wasn't my wife yet, and she didn't want to move to Fresno, so she was adamant about staying in the Los Angeles area, and when the whole thing blew up on us I figured well, there's not much chance of doing anything anymore, so I started looking for a job, and I basically came down here into Southern California and started—I sent out vitas, and I started dropping in to any college, community college, four-year college, I interviewed at Fullerton, at Cal State LA, put in for the test with the LA Community College system, interesting enough, I went up to Ventura Community College in Ventura, and also I just—I had never heard of this place—didn't know about it—you know, it's on the list of schools, so I stopped by and they were very interested because they were hiring four people that year. And so I came down here on the fifth of May, 1970—and was interviewed. I remember that date because (John laughs) it was—

(00:09:52)

JB: You would, wouldn't you?

JG: —that's the night that the Chicano house burned, the first Chicano house over there, and I had to come to three interviews, at that time, we had a process when there was interview with—prospective candidates, where faculty had to be interviewed by faculty, then there was a Chicano affairs committee which was representative of students, faculty, staff, and community, and that interview took place over at the Joint Venture headquarters over in—which was a poverty agency headquarters over in the city of San Fernando, and then the third interview was an interview at MEChA, and it turned out I was down here on the fifth of May so they were having a big celebration, and were there at the Chicano house over by the credit union, or what used to be the credit union over there on that side of the campus. And I remember going there that afternoon, and there was a party going on, they stopped the music in the middle of this party, and they said, Ok, here's another one of the candidates for hire, and we have to get him interviewed, and so this is the interview. And so in the middle of this party (John laughs), this interview took place, and it was a very interesting interview because it was basically no holds barred, and then people would ask, What are your personal priorities? Give us your top three priorities. And I mean(??) I remember José Hernández who had been hired the previous year goes, "You know, that's not a fair question." I said, "No that's a fair question." So I ran through it and some people liked it, some people didn't, but I found out later that they liked that I gave an answer because some people would not answer.

JB: These are faculty and students—

JG: Faculty, students, everybody—

JB: Everybody leaps in(??)

JG: Yeah, because that MEChA—MEChA is faculty and students, and basically you had to go before a MEChA meeting at that time at the interview, that was the third and final interview. Now, any one of those could—if it was no, then you weren't going to get hired in those days so, that was the process I went through. So it was interesting, I didn't know San Fernando Valley State was looking, and I was looking for something—Ventura Community College and San Fernando both offered at the same time. There's nothing more discouraging—I don't know whether you've been through that, to be out looking for a job, and to be continued to be told no or for example, Cal State LA said, Well yeah we'd love to, but we won't know until the semester actually starts whether we can. And you're sitting there saying, That's September, or actually, the quarter system is October. And at that point I was—I basically decided I was leaving the San Joaquin Valley, and basically casting my luck with this young lady down here, and she refused to—she wouldn't move up there, and I said, Well, that's not a good—don't force it, so I says, Eh, Mexicans have moved looking for work for an awful a lot of years, so I figured why should I be any different? So I moved, and that's how I ended up at San Fernando Valley State.

JB: That's an extraordinary recruitment story, unlike any I've ever heard (both laugh). You had an earlier background in the fields, would you like to talk a bit about that? You and your family had been farm owners.

(00:12:41)

JG: Um-hm. Yeah, it's an interesting—that's—and still is to a large part of this day, that's what people in the San Joaquin Valley do. I mean there's a lot of other things going on, and there's also regional things—you're coming south to the oil fields, there's jobs there, but in the Central San Joaquin Valley, it's primarily fields, or jobs related to agriculture. And basically, being in a farm type situation even though for the first six, seven years of my life that I don't remember a lot of. We lived in a little town called Dinuba, right behind the high school, right on Short Avenue. I have just kind of vague, picture type memories of incidents and different things that happened then, but at that point then we moved out to the country—to the farm, and in that kind of setting, everybody works, even when we're in town, you're out there with your parents and there are certain kinds of jobs, like the harvesting, the picking of the raisin grids—the tray grids. You still see that to this day, the little kids are out there, but you don't just have them out there, because you want them nearby, you don't want them wandering around, and because it's piece rate, they give the kid a little plastic bucket and a semi-dull knife, or better yet, clippers, and you go along, you pick a few grapes and you dump them into your mother or father, or your older brother's pan, there's a pan that usually you tip if you have to have about twenty, twenty-five pounds of grapes—fresh grapes in it before you fill up the tray that dries the raisins. So that you're integrated into it, the olive harvesting—now, olives were

picked in the fall, typically after we went back to school, but Saturdays and Sundays you'd be out there and what—since it's piece rate, again your parents would basically say, You can reach this high on the tree, I'm not going to pick this. You kids pick everything you can reach from the ground because—olives, you have some huge ladders, nothing (unintelligible) a twenty-four-foot ladder, a single—not a tripod, you just have to know how to throw it against a tree and work it. And so we were introduced into it, and it just becomes a part of life, and everybody has to contribute. Not unlike by the way, the situation you find in urban barrios today when people have to contribute—we're back on the farm, in similar economic conditions we have today, but that's another story. And the conditions in those days there were, it's not until 1960—well '65, the great strike of Delano starts, and it won't be 1968 before you see the beginnings of the legislation, and it's at that point that California even has any legislation which required things like deployments uh—the clean cool drinking water, disposable cups, water to wash your hands; none of that was required up until then. And typically you took your own water, and if you didn't, then you had to look for water and maybe drink it out of a canal—an irrigation canal or out of a standpipe or something. It's amazing what people, since—you'd have to get a jug of some kind, and I've seen people use empty pesticide gallon jugs as water containers, and once you find out what the heck was in the jug, you tell the people, don't do that, but to them it's a perfectly good jug, because a pesticide jug are usually a very good quality plastic, unlike—you get a milk gallon jug, it's real flimsy, and because it's so thin and flimsy—the other thing is that water immediately heats up, but a thicker plastic forms a type of insulation, so many of these pesticide gallon jugs are readily available, cheap, and much better than the milk or punch jugs, so you see people doing that all the time. And as we were mentioning earlier, parathion was probably the most potent thing, we all knew it, we were all afraid of it, because we would see the skull and cross bone signs posted, and everybody knew stories or knew someone that had died from parathion. Now, one of the typical responses to a situation like that is that it's usually a question of mishandling, yes it is. But you've got to realize that it may be mishandling in the sense that something was clearly labeled in English, but the person handling it was Spanish speaking, or that protective gear was provided, except it was never fully explained to you—how to use the protective gear, and how you had to have it on you at all times, and many times the protective gear is very hot, very uncomfortable, and in some cases you have to buy it. See, it's also the 1968 laws which then make at least a legal requirement in the state of California that all hand tools and protective paraphernalia should be provided by the employer. Prior to that, if you went to work—in fact, even now with those kind of laws, you go to work, you don't have your own tools, pruning shears or whatever, you can rent them at a nice daily price, or you can buy them at an inflated price, or you better show up with your own. And in some cases even when you show up with your own, a labor contractor will say no no no, we have to have a standardized crew, so you're going to buy or you're going to rent from me. But basically we grew up in that kind of setting where two brothers and two sisters, and depending on what type of work was going on—the weeding of cotton, there used to be a lot more cotton growing in the central San Joaquin Valley at that time. Now I got in some of the last of the hand picking, now

the machinery that came in about particularly at the time of the Second World War, and some of the smaller places were very slow at switching to machines, some of the small time farmers. And also too, the early machinery didn't do a very good job at picking cotton where the fields were weedy—it had to be fairly weed free for the machines to work well, to get a decent yield, otherwise you end up with too much of your cotton on the ground. So it was the dirty fields, the small fields that were left for hand picking—and I got into some of the hand picking, that's a horrible job, you have this big sack that feels like it weighs a ton, then you go out there and you got a hundred twenty five pounds of cotton and you get two cents a pound for it—picking it. And while we're in it, we never really—never really saw it I think as oppressive in the sense of having a real clear understanding of the dynamics of the overall situation other than, it was a chance to work. We saw for example, the fact that if we worked ten hours, we got at that time, ten hours—wages. Because if the contractor didn't take it, there was no Social Security deducted, which to us at that time—you remember the short-term perspective of somebody who needs to earn money, is that it's good that they don't deduct; it's good that there are no taxes taken out; it's good there's no Social Security. What that meant down the road were some serious problems for people until Social Security—they started deducting and started having various kinds of unemployment insurance and workman's comp and so on, as they do now. But at that time, if you signed on for a dollar an hour, and you work ten hours, if you had a straight deal with a farmer, you got the ten dollars, and we thought that was great, and we thought the fact that particularly the harvest time which—harvesting of the fruit, well it used to be basically from around—that the varieties of fruits that were available (unintelligible) that were available at that time were the plums, and the peaches, and the nectarines. Basically we didn't start picking till school let out, about the 20th, 25th of June, and we would harvest all the way through off and on, and with some cannery peaches—you get into the grapes in the fall, the raisin harvest, and that would run us into the school year, and we had the kind of system up there, until it was challenged—much later, in I guess—late '60s, maybe even in the '70s by the California Rural Legal Assistants, that all you had to do come September—and we're talking late September you know, the 18th, 20th, 21st—you show up the first day, register, and then you had permission to leave for two weeks, go back and go to work.

(00:20:55)

JB: To leave school.

JG: To leave school. And I wasn't considered truant, it wasn't—because you were basically on the books for those two weeks if you came back. And so that meant in a lot of ways that school could start as early, uh, as late as October 1st. My parents were always pro-education—I found out much later my father has an eighth-grade education, and my mother got into the third week of the tenth grade, and part of their problem was the time they—they were both educated in central San Joaquin Valley, my father was born in Tyrone, New Mexico, and my mother in Hanford, California. And they had a system

where you went into first grade and you just stayed there until you learned English. So my father spent three years in the first grade, and my mother spent two, so consequently, by the time my father was in the eighth grade he was sixteen years old—he was fifteen going on sixteen so he would just go to work. But I found out much later that he had a dream of becoming an M.D. and it just wasn't possible, so he went to work at fifteen and a half, sixteen. But they were always very pro-education so that they, typically—what they would do is basically try to have some work lined up for us as soon as we got home from school—try to have something. That was one of the advantages of living in the country where you know, if you're in town, you move around. If you're out there you can get home and go to work, and then Saturdays and Sundays it was always work. But they basically wanted us in school from the beginning, even during the summer what—we would make a three-and-a-half-mile trip into town every two weeks and go to the public library, we had one of those old Carnegie libraries in town. And the typical thing, you start off over here in first grade, and you can only use these sections, and then from fourth to eighth grade you can use this, and then from high school and on, you're over here. So they basically took us in every two weeks even during the summer, and you know, You will check out books, and we just worked our way around that library.

JB: (unintelligible)

JG: Yeah, and—

JB: They were mainly (??) field workers, through the years?

JG: Yeah, and—but I think it's real clear in my mind that they had tremendous potential, and my mother almost got back on target because she skipped sixth grade, they skipped her. And what happened, she—I don't know what she wanted to do, she never really said, but she started the tenth grade and got about three weeks into it, and her father, my grandfather told her, "I can't see having you at your age in school, and if you're going to go to school, you've got to buy all of your stuff, buy your lunches, buy—because I'm not giving you a penny, you've got to support yourself." And, well actually that was at the starting of the tenth grade, she said she tried it for three weeks and decided that trying to work and go to high school just didn't work. Especially since they were out in a rural area and then they had to ride a bus in and out, and by the time they got home, it was dark and she wasn't getting any work done. Basically her father said, "How could you eat at this table when you're not contributing, look, your age." So she—she quit.

JB: What years approximately were you in the fields? And from what age to what age would you say?

JG: Well um—I was born in '43, and I said this other—this child's thing going on, I remember even hearing my grandparents talk about how they would—we'd go over the next two, three rows and visit my grandparents and then pick three grapes and dump them in

their pan, so it was off and on through the ’40s and in the ’50s, I would say probably around junior high is when it started getting serious, so what, ’57, ’58? And even then, you got kind of marginal kinds of jobs, you got to do—you got paid less, we—I remember in junior high, we thought it was fantastic, the wages at that time were ninety cents, a dollar an hour, we got offered a job, fifty cents an hour to weed cotton, and we thought that was incredible.

JB: Those were good wages?

JG: For us, I mean for kids.

JB: For kids.

(00:24:53)

JG: For kids it was fantastic. All you had to do was go out and swing a hoe and get the weeds. That’s all we had to do, so we did it all we could. And then of course I started high school in ’61—and—no, ’57 to—finished high school in ’61. And then at that point after finishing high school, what we basically started doing, is my two brothers and I with my—and some cousins used get together and go find summer jobs, because that way we’d drive together. It’d be a carload of us and it was always—it became, even at that age, god it’s fun in a way. You go out there and you work like hell, but there’s a payoff, especially if it’s piece rate—you make some good money. But there were always times when we’d get shortchanged, and I want to talk about the time we were swamping—we’re picking the cannery peaches, and it’s fifty-pound picks in boxes. And at some point, the boxes that we’d fill had to be hauled out, so they needed two people on the ground to pick up these fifty pound boxes, put them up on a trailer that’s pulled by a tractor in the field and two up on top, stacking, and we’d go roadside where the truck is, and we’d have to load swamp from the trailer to the truck. And the owner came through and he picked out four of us, all young kids, who were hustling, picking, practically running down ladders because it was piece rate, and he says that—he said, “Look, I’m going to pay you piece rate for swamping, two dollars a ton.” And we figured ok, they’re fifty pound picks, so we figured out how many there had to be in a ton. Approximately, he would give us some slippings(??) there, and so we kept a rough count on how many tons we were swamping. And by our account, we figured that if there’s two dollars a ton, there’s four of us, that’s fifty cents a ton each. So we would pick until there was enough for the truckload, then we’d go swamp like heck, go up there and load the truck, come back out, pick, then load up and go back, and it was killing us. We’d be down there some evenings and we’d start picking at six, and it would be eight o’clock in the evening when we’d be loading the last of the full boxes on the truck. And, we didn’t mind though, because by our calculations, we were earning 120, 140 dollars a day each. Figuring at fifty cents a ton, with a rough approximation of fifty pounds per box. When we got our checks at the end of the week, and they'd looked like we’d been working by the hour, and we said, What happened? And we showed him our calculations and he

says, “No no no, you misunderstood, the two dollars a ton included the truck, so by the time we paid the truck, this is your share of it.” So we in effect, earned less than we would have had we had stayed picking full time, because we weren’t picking those times when we were out swamping. So Monday morning, the next morning, and we didn’t—there was a very interesting twist on it up there, the Rainbow Ballroom in Fresno, used to have dances Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night. And Sunday night was always Mexican night, in the sense that they would put on the bands like Ray Camacho, that were clearly for the Mexicans. And if you think about it, they had at that time—now the Rainbow Ballroom if it’s still operating, the last time I saw it, they had all weekend longs for Mexicans, but that time very clearly, Friday and Saturday night were not pitched exclusively at Mexicans. It was the more the popular music at the time, but Sunday night at the Rainbow Ballroom was always the Mexican people came in from—drive sixty seventy miles one way to go to the Rainbow Ballroom. And the horrible thing about that was, that we’d be down there till 2 a.m. till they closed the place, and drive home, have breakfast, and then be on a ladder at six o’clock, many times without any sleep, (laughs) during the summer. Well, we were young, and that was the big thing to do, it’s only in retrospect you thought, That was an incredible abuse of us, because the other folks who didn’t work in the fields got to have their dances on Friday and Saturday night. Here, we’re out there in the field, maybe we got Sunday off, maybe we didn’t, but it was—we used to joke about by Wednesday we felt good again. (both laugh).

JB: Let’s move down to the—into the department here again. It’s been said that there would be no department of Pan-African Studies if there hadn’t been the violence of 1968. Can something like that be said of the Chicano Studies Department do you think?

(00:29:41)

JG: If there hadn’t been the student protests—I think to say just student protests, because student protest in and of itself doesn’t necessarily generate anything. I think student protests kind of sent a shockwave through, which got some people to dig in—got some other people to say, Wait a minute, we better pay some attention to this and I think—but that student protest and the violence matched together with I think at that time, some very important community support and involvement. It wasn’t just what was going on in the campus, it was the fact that in terms of Chicano Studies that not only were Chicano students protesting, marching, and so on, but there were people like Guadalupe Ramirez out here from the Sylmar, San Fernando area, there were people like Susana Morales—these were people who came in who had some kind of legitimacy and authority as leaders out there in those communities, and could—and Irene Tovar, for whatever you want to say about her, since she has some backing out there, some stature in the community, that she would come in, and she was also a student too. Some of these—when we talk about community and students sometimes, the students are also from, we’re from—we as professors live in communities somewhere, it’s kind of an ivory tower dichotomy we create, but nevertheless there’s some people who are clearly community, they’re not and have not been here as students. But they were

interested in promoting things Chicano, things Latino, and I think that was a very—that's another part of the picture, a very important part. Something clicked.

JB: We're just about to go off tape here.

JG: Ok.

JB: And we just did.

[END OF TRACK 1]