

Palm_School_Ruiz_Michael

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Palm School, community education, political participation, East Austin, NASA, UT Austin, childhood memories, family support, education challenges, extracurricular activities, safety patrol, tumbling classes, May Day celebration, library fines, career journey., Palm School, NASA, STEM education, scholarship, community involvement, Salvation Army Youth Center, economy furniture strike, Cesar Chavez, political activism, family support, educational challenges, entrepreneurial adventures, neighborhood memories, generosity, historical preservation.

SPEAKERS

Annette Rodriguez, Michael Ruiz

Annette Rodriguez 00:00

Hi. Today is Sunday, December 15, 2024 My name is Annette Rodriguez. I'm interviewing Mike Ruiz in Austin, Texas for the Travis County oral history project. We are at the University of Texas at Austin campus. Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. The raw unedited recording of this interview will be archived at the Travis County archives, where it will be available to anyone who wishes to access it. So as we noted earlier, if there's anything you don't wish to talk about, we respect your wishes. Also, if there's something you want to discuss, please make sure we do let me know. Also, let us know if you need to pause the interview for any reason at all. Today, we're going to talk about your life experiences, and we're going to talk about a lot of how it relates to the palm school. We'll also discuss your relationship to community education and political participation. And so if you're ready, Mr. Ruiz, we can begin.

Michael Ruiz 01:06

Okay, I guess I'll just start off where I grew up, which was in East Austin. I started, I guess our first home that I can remember was in a duplex off of San Marcos Street and East First Street. Probably lived there from the ages of maybe one to about four or five, something like that, maybe three, and then we moved from there to the back of my grandma's house on East Third Street and Waller street. There was a little maybe 300 square foot structure there, basically bedroom, living room and kitchen. So it was pretty small. Grew up there and stayed there until, probably I would say, we moved to Holly Street, and around 1965 I think it was so pretty much my whole life was living there in East Austin. I stayed there until I was 26 when I moved to Houston to work for NASA so and and I lived with my parents while I was going to UT and Austin Community college. So I stayed there a very long time here in the Austin area. And then, of course, I graduated UT and went to work for NASA.

Annette Rodriguez 02:58

Yeah. So what are your earliest memories of that, that little duplex. Do you remember the colors, the smells, the sounds?

Michael Ruiz 03:08

It's funny, you say, ask about colors, because they're my earliest memory of that place. And I had to ask my mom about this. She says, Yeah, you were probably about two years old. I was outside of the duplex, and there was an alleyway that went from San Marcos street all the way to Waller Street. And I remember looking in that alleyway one time and I saw a real bright, shiny object. I don't know what it was. I have no idea what it was at the time. All I know is that it scared me, and I thought it was a The only thing I could think of as a two year old was a television and it was real bright, and I just remember running back inside. That's the earliest memory of mine that I have. My mom said I was maybe about two or three, and when I look back, I think what it was was some glint. The sun was shining on some shiny object that was on Waller street near the El Buen Pastor Presbyterian Church. And something shiny was shining directly at me, and pretty sure that's what it was, but that's the earliest memories I have of of being at the duplex, and it scared you. It scared me, yeah, because I didn't, had no idea what it was,

Annette Rodriguez 04:35

and did you have siblings? Were you? Were you with a sibling at that point or walking alone in that alley.

Michael Ruiz 04:42

I was walking alone. I did have a sibling, but I think my brother Jim was inside the duplex. But I do remember being alone. I do remember running back inside because I didn't know what it was.

Annette Rodriguez 04:58

And then so when you all moved to. Your your grandmother's property, and you lived in this this place, it was your parents and your brother, your older brother, Jim,

Michael Ruiz 05:09

correct. Yes, we moved there to the back of my grandma and grandpa's house, and we were probably there from the ages of, I'd say, three or four. I remember going to palm school, first grade. So I was about almost six when I started palm school. So yeah, we were there for the during those years, behind my grandma's house. So we were really close to my grandma and my grandpa, because we lived right in the backyard. So that was very, very nice to to have that opportunity.

Annette Rodriguez 05:49

Your brother went to palm school. Also.

Michael Ruiz 05:51

My brother went to palm school. He was one year older than me, so he was always a grade above me, which is really, really good, because going somewhere for the first time. He always did that for me. He did that for me in elementary school. And I remember him telling me, Don't be afraid. You know, don't be afraid. I'm going to be there. Um, sorry, but I lost my brother to pancreatic cancer. 2018 I miss him.

But anyway, he did that for me at Palm school. He did that for me at Martin junior high school, and he did that for me at UT, oh, Johnston High School, and he did that for me at UT as well. So he was, he was the trailblazer for me.

Annette Rodriguez 06:46

He was always paving the way for you. He was, do you remember that first day at Palm school?

Michael Ruiz 06:52

I remember the first day at Palm school. It it was a little scary. I remember sitting like towards the middle back of the class, and my teacher was Miss Wheeler. I remember Miss Wheeler. I was just trying to, you know, I had never been in an environment with with that many kids all together in one room. We had a big family. So, yeah, it was kids, but these were, like, people, kids that I didn't know, that I learned to become friends with. So yeah, it was, it was a little apprehensive, even even though my brother had paved the way, it was still a little apprehensive.

Annette Rodriguez 07:35

And was he in across the hallway, in another classroom? Was he on another floor? Do you remember

Michael Ruiz 07:41

he was, I think, first, second and third, first and second graders, I believe, were in the back of the school, down the stairs towards the bottom, and he was in the second grade. So he was either on that level, or he may have been on the first floor of palm school as you enter the front door.

Annette Rodriguez 08:00

So when you walk into the school in the morning, do you separate out into your classrooms? Do you say goodbye to each other? Do you find each other later?

Michael Ruiz 08:10

Yes, yes. When we go to school together, we walk to school together. We would go into the front of the school, and I would have to go. He would leave before I would because maybe in the second grade, he'd probably go all the way down with me to the back of the school on the bottom floor. And then when I got to second grade, and he was in third then he would stay at the first level as you walk into palm school, and I would go down the stairs to the second level.

Annette Rodriguez 08:40

And did you find each other? Was there recess or lunch breaks?

Michael Ruiz 08:46

We did not have lunch together. I don't ever remember eating lunch with him, nor recess. I think they kind of separated the grades and kept the children separate. The students separate during those times I don't remember having recess with him or eating lunch with him. No,

Annette Rodriguez 09:05

were you able to make friends? What was that like? You start out apprehensive, and you're in this new classroom? Yes,

Michael Ruiz 09:13

making friends was very easy at palm school, the kids were all friendly. I could see some of them were very apprehensive and wanted to go home, especially in the first grade. Of course, after you make friends, everything was fine. There was no issues after that.

Annette Rodriguez 09:34

Do you remember what they were teaching you in first grade?

Michael Ruiz 09:38

I remember, yes, they would teach us writing. We were going to learn the alphabet. So they had, I remember all these, they had all these letters on the wall where you would you could see a, b. They were just. Teaching us and to write. And I believe, if I remember correctly, we started learning about, see Dick run, see Spot Run, Hi, Sally, those kind of things. So that was kind of all new to me.

Annette Rodriguez 10:19

Did you know how to read before you got there? Or you learned how to read in that grade level? No,

Michael Ruiz 10:25

I remember learning to read in school. I didn't know how to read at all. We didn't have any no items at home that parents didn't prepare anything for us. It was we didn't go to, you know, pre K or anything like that, or kindergarten went straight in to school. And I know that for sure because I remember going up to my grandpa's house, and he had these magazines. I know now what they were, Time magazines, and I remember just looking at the pictures and wondering, what is all this other stuff right here next to the pictures? What is all of that? Well, you know, I didn't know what words were, so I knew I didn't, I didn't know how to read at that time.

Annette Rodriguez 11:13

Do you remember your grandparents reading?

Michael Ruiz 11:17

My grandparents reading? Remember my grandpa really loved to read the newspaper. During dinner time, he would eat his food, and then he'd pull out the newspaper and he'd just start reading. I think it was the Austin American Statesman. Yeah, I remember that for sure. I never I don't think I saw him read the Time magazines, but he had like, a big stack of them right there in the living room where he sat.

Annette Rodriguez 11:43

And what about your grandma? Did she ever read? Or I don't ever

Michael Ruiz 11:47

remember my grandma reading, but she did watch the novellas she the English ones. I remember her having the TV on all the time while she was cleaning the house or cooking for when my grandma, I mean, sorry, my grandpa came home. I remember her "As the World Turns" I think that was one of her favorites, because I remember that one. And then when we come home from school, she turned the TV on to cartoons like "Popeye" or something like that for us so we could watch the cartoons.

Annette Rodriguez 12:22

So you all had a TV in your grandma's house? Did you have one in your small house?

Michael Ruiz 12:26

We didn't have one at our small house. No, kind of a poor family, so we didn't have much, but my grandma and grandpa had a black and white TV. That was pretty cool.

Annette Rodriguez 12:39

Did other kids from the neighborhood know that. Did anyone ever come see your TV? Your grandma's TV?

Michael Ruiz 12:46

No, no kids from the neighborhood ever stopped by. Actually, I don't remember many kids coming to the house at all. Only family members that were when we had special occasions, or if they were visiting, they would stop by. So none of the kids really came by to the house to watch TV with us.

Annette Rodriguez 13:08

So you made, you made close friends or quick friends in first grade. Sounds like you picked up reading and writing pretty quickly.

Michael Ruiz 13:17

I think I did. I remember being in, let's see, probably about the third or fourth grade at Palm school. I recall a couple of young people now I know that they were college students, came into the classroom and they took me to the lunch room and wanted me to take some testing. And like, okay, you know, I just the teacher said, go. So I went, and they had me answer a bunch of questions. And I was just like, okay, so. And then they came back, and then, like, a few weeks later, they sent a note to my parents saying, Hey, your fourth grader is reading at 11th, grade level. I'm like, what? And I was, I was really shocked, and I think it was because my parents had bought me these child craft encyclopedia had like, make and do you would make things. And it had all these, I don't know how many volumes, 12 or 13 volumes, and I remember reading every single one of them. And I thought, Okay, well, what am I going to read next? You know, I even read the last one. The last one was not interesting at all, and it had some big words that I didn't understand. Well, that was the turned out. I looked back and that was the parents guide to child. So I was like, Okay, I look back and I think, I wonder why that one wasn't very. Interesting, and that one was much harder. But yeah, I was, I was really surprised reading at 11th grade level, in the fourth grade, and I think I attribute that to the child craft books that they that they got for us.

Annette Rodriguez 15:13

And did you do that on your own? Did you just come home after school and open a book and work your way through it, yes,

Michael Ruiz 15:20

just opened up the book, and they had some little projects that you would do and make and do, was one of the things that was one of my favorites, and then, kind of like a little history one, science was always my favorite, one, where you learned about space and telescopes and the stars and those, those are the ones that I gravitated to and and would read over and over again.

Annette Rodriguez 15:46

Do you remember any of the making do's for for science?

Michael Ruiz 15:50

I remember a making do. One of them was you would build a little submarine out of cardboard boxes. I remember that one in particular, so I was trying to find cardboard boxes for whatever and find some scotch tape, and I was going to make that submarine. I don't think I ever made it, because I didn't get enough boxes and I didn't have enough scotch tape, but that's what I wanted. I remember that particular one, I would always turn to that page, ooh, submarine. I'm gonna make that one.

Annette Rodriguez 16:23

It's never too late,

Michael Ruiz 16:24

never too late.

Annette Rodriguez 16:27

So your, your parents, they encouraged you by buying this whole set of encyclopedias. Did they encourage you while you were reading or while you were building?

Michael Ruiz 16:38

Um, well, my parents weren't around too much because they both had to work. So my dad worked at the economy furniture company. So he was gone. He would leave. He would leave before I got up in the morning, because the economy furniture was way out in North Austin. So they would carpool, and they would pick him up, and he was gone, and when he came back home, it wasn't until probably about four or five, maybe something like that. And this is when we lived at on Holly Street, my mom at that time, once, let's see, once I was in school, my mom never worked until both my brother and I were in elementary school once, once we were in school. Then she she got a job at the model laundry right there on East First Street and Waller Street, kind of like a half a block west of Waller Street. I remember walking from Palm school home after school, and stopped him by there, and she was inside. It was really hot in there. I think she was making, like \$1 an hour or something like that. But yeah, so they weren't really around to encourage that. Other than just presenting us with the encyclopedias, it was up to us if we wanted to read it or not.

Annette Rodriguez 18:13

Yeah. So you all walked to the laundromat and did you? Did you hang out there? Did you chat with your mom?

Michael Ruiz 18:20

Yes, it was a it was a laundry and cleaners. So people would drop off their laundry, and my mom worked in the back. It was really, really hot back there, and I remember I would kind of just hang out there waiting until she got off of work. And then once she was off of work, then we would walk home, which was only, like a block and a half away. She was, I remember they would, or at least they would separate all the laundry, and then they would go through the pockets, looking for stuff, taking anything out, pens or anything that might ruin the laundry, and then separate it. And that's that's all she did all day long.

Annette Rodriguez 19:04

And do you remember what it smelled like? We know it was hot, yeah, what did it smell like in there? Did the did the smell of of that laundry go outside the doors as you were walking out?

Michael Ruiz 19:17

I think probably the you could feel the heat, mostly because it was not air conditioned. But the smell was, I don't know how to describe laundry smell, because the clothes that she was working with hadn't been cleaned yet. So it wasn't awful or anything, but yeah, it was a distinct smell.

Annette Rodriguez 19:45

And then you all would walk home together, and did you have homework to do when you got home

Michael Ruiz 19:52

at that age, first and second grade, the really didn't have any homework at all. Uh, but we, yeah, we would walk home together. I don't remember my brother stopping by at the laundry. Maybe every once in a while we would all walk home, but I think he would, he would go straight home. I was Mama's boy. I had to go stop by where my mom was and just wait till she got off work, and then we would go, go home together.

Annette Rodriguez 20:25

Do you remember what the neighbor, what you passed through in the neighborhood as you were walking there and back?

Michael Ruiz 20:29

Yes, there was, there was, let's see, there was a store on the corner of Waller Street and East First Street. It was on the, I want to say south east corner. I don't know why the name keeslers comes to mind, but it was like a five and dime store. I remember that place, that place in particular, because that's where I would go buy all my Christmas presents and my birthday presents for family. And so they had things that were like, really, really cheap. You could get things for a nickel there, and I think on the side of the building had like, five cents, 10 cents or something like that. So I loved going there. Where did I get the money? Well, I was always looking for bottles, Coke bottles to return. Take them to the little local store there, mom and pop store, and, you know, get a couple of cents or something. And then

I would go, you know, it was my mom's birthday or Christmas, and I would go buy something for her and take it home.

Annette Rodriguez 21:46

Do you remember some of the gifts you bought there?

Michael Ruiz 21:50

Nobody smoked in the house, but I bought an ashtray because it was really cheap. So I remember that maybe, like a little vase that had some plastic flowers, something like that. Yeah, those were some of the things that come to mind that I bought at that place, maybe a little cup or something. Yeah, they had a lot of glass wear there. I remember that had to be careful not to break anything.

Annette Rodriguez 22:24

Did you have a space in the house where you kept your your change after you exchanged your bottles? Did you have a piggy bank or

Michael Ruiz 22:32

Yes, I had one of those kind of like those little leather purses. I think it was from Mexico or something, because I think it said Mexico on there, and it was just one of them had a little zipper on it where you just unzipped it and you'd open it up and keep all your coins in there, little coin purse. And then another one was kind of a rubber one, kind of in the shape of avocado, and then you would press the ends, and it would open up like that. And all the coins were in there. I remember those for sure.

Annette Rodriguez 23:07

And then you just save it up for for a special occasion. For a special

Michael Ruiz 23:12

occasion, exactly, all right, sometimes I didn't have enough money to buy gifts for Christmas, so what I would do is just find something around the house, maybe an eraser, a pencil, a toy that I had, and I would wrap it up and put it under the Christmas tree, because I wanted lots of presents under the Christmas tree. So most of the presents were from my brother, and I'm sure he was probably disappointed when he opened him up, because that's your toy.

Annette Rodriguez 23:49

How did you wrap them? Did you wrap them yourself? I wrapped myself in paper.

Michael Ruiz 23:53

I wrapped the presents myself with I think we had a little bit of wrapping paper. But believe most of the time I use newspaper because my my grandfather would get the newspaper, so there was plenty of the newspaper that I could use to wrap those presents.

Annette Rodriguez 24:11

And you remember having a Christmas tree with presents under it?

Michael Ruiz 24:15

Oh yes, yes. I remember one year coming back from Palm school. For some reason, the teacher let me have the classroom Christmas tree. So I was, like, completely excited, because it was a it was a real tree. It was really small, and it was already decorated with everything. So I had to come home, walk home with the Christmas tree, and I was really all proud and took it inside the house, and that was our Christmas tree that year. So that was really, really cool.

Annette Rodriguez 24:46

Do you remember that teacher's name?

Michael Ruiz 24:49

Well, let's see that was in second grade. So that would probably be Miss Melton. Yeah,

Annette Rodriguez 24:57

that's very sweet. What does sweet gift to give your whole family? Oh, yeah.

Michael Ruiz 25:01

Well, think it was very sweet of the teacher. I'm not sure why I why I was able to get that tree. I don't recall what if I won it in a drawing, or if I did good in school, or something like that, but I do remember bringing that Christmas tree home.

Annette Rodriguez 25:30

Were you a teacher's pet?

Michael Ruiz 25:31

I was a teacher's pet in the sixth grade with Miss Johnson. The reason I say that is because Miss Johnson had a yard stick that that she would use to get your attention if you were talking too much, or if you were, you know, messing around over here, doing something, she'd grab the yard stick and tap you. She wouldn't hit your hard. She would just tap you on the shoulder or on the arm to grab your attention. So one time, my friend Benedict was in my class. We were really, really close, and he was talking to somebody else. I don't remember who that somebody else, Miss John Johnson was saying, hey, you need to be quiet over there. She said several times. So at some point, I grabbed the yard stick from the from the chalkboard edge, and I tapped that guy on the arm. I said, Miss Johnson. Said to be quiet. And he just kind of looked at me, and Miss Johnson didn't say anything. I did that a couple of times, and I think I figured, like, wow, she lets me do that. I think she likes me. That's what made me think that I was the teacher's pet.

Annette Rodriguez 26:41

You became her enforcer,

Michael Ruiz 26:45

yeah, the enforcer for the sixth grade.

Annette Rodriguez 26:47

Were you ever on Safety Patrol?

Michael Ruiz 26:50

Oh my goodness, Safety Patrol. Yes, that that was, uh, that was like the highlight of my day when I was on safety patrol, because you as a sixth grade student, would get to go out to the corners, you know, and I 35 and East First Street was very, very busy intersection for kids, so you had to, in the morning, we would go and grab the pole that had a little flag on it that you would use. You would hold it out. The kids would wait right there. And you had to watch the light and make sure none of the little kids stepped off the curb. And then, once the light turned green, make sure you look both ways and allow the kids to go through. So made you feel like, wow, I have, you know, I have some power here. And then, of course, you get to where the the Belt came across, right here, all the way down with the badge, the badge. And if you were a captain, you were it for the day. So I love doing that. I really enjoyed being on the safety patrol. I remember one time, I was on safety patrol, and it was after school safety patrol instead of before school. And I remember I went to, let's see, on the east side of I 35 and East First Street, holding my pole out. And I recall the junior high school bus going by, and my uncle was in there, and he said, "Mike!" And I looked up. I said, "Hey!", I was all excited. Holding my pole right there and he goes. It's after school. "You're supposed to be on the other side of the street because the kids are coming from over there", and I'm like, oh yeah. So I had to cross the street and go where the kids were going to be coming across. I was on the wrong side. I was on the morning side. So yeah, that was pretty funny. I was a little embarrassed about that,

Annette Rodriguez 28:58

because it was a complicated way to get across, right? There were a couple of points the kids had to cross.

Michael Ruiz 29:06

Yes, they had to. They had from Palm School, which is on the north west corner of I 35 and East first street they had to cross over south to to the other side of of East First Street. And then from there they had to cross over to towards the the bridge side, and then walk under the bridge. And then there they would cross the other side of I 35 the northbound side.

Annette Rodriguez 29:37

So you all were really as important as you felt it was really important for you to be there.

Michael Ruiz 29:44

Yes, it was really, really important. Nowadays, you know, they have these guards that are at the different corners to watch the kids, but back then, it was just the sixth graders were in charge of the kids. So I didn't realize at the time. Time that it was that critical, but it really was.

Annette Rodriguez 30:08

How did you join the Safety Patrol?

Michael Ruiz 30:12

I think the teacher asked who wants to be on safety patrol, and I think once the word safety came up. My hand was already halfway up. Who wants to be on Safety Patrol? I do. So, yeah, just that was a, you know, I don't, I look back and I think it was just boys. I'm not sure. I don't remember any girls being on it, but, yeah, of course, all the boys wanted to be on and I think you had, you had to be you'd had to have good grades. So not just anyone could be on there. You had to have good grades to be on on Safety Patrol. And you had good grades. I had good grades. Yes, mostly, mostly, there was some report cards to where I had, like, a little in needs to improve. And I remember as a kid thinking, initiates worthwhile activities, needs to improve. I'm like, what is that initiates worthwhile activities? I was always like, drawing airplanes on a piece of paper, and airplanes coming through and, you know, just doing my own thing, really. So I guess that's what it was.

Annette Rodriguez 31:35

Did you ever make paper airplanes at school?

Michael Ruiz 31:37

Oh, yes, made some paper airplanes. But my thing was just drawing all of the all of the stuff. I don't know why I was into airplanes and soldiers and maybe from some of the movies I saw as a kid.

Annette Rodriguez 31:54

Do you remember what some of those movies were?

Michael Ruiz 31:59

Oh, let's see of course, there was one called The Longest Day. I believe it was, I remember that being a long movie, like three hours or something like that. And then, of course, whenever there was just programs on TV where they had the Americans fighting the Germans or something like that. Those, those kind of movies kind of influenced me. For some reason.

Annette Rodriguez 32:30

Did you ever watch any westerns?

Michael Ruiz 32:33

I remember watching as a kid, probably John Wayne as a Western a and, of course, yeah, cowboys and Indians as a kid that time, you know, you watch those kind of things, and that's just what you grew up with, and that's what they showed and kind of like, that's what influenced you?

Annette Rodriguez 33:03

Do you remember the extracurricular activities you did at Palm school? Did you do any of the I know they had band and they had things after school and before school?

Michael Ruiz 33:15

Yes. Believe we did my brother and I did tumbling. So I remember Mrs. Swenson, who was the PE teacher, older lady, but man, she was in really, really good shape, thin, strong. I remember her encouraging us to get in to tumbling. So my brother and I decided to take some tumbling classes at the Austin Athletic Club. So sometimes she would actually my parents were working, so she would have to

take us and drop us off at the Austin Athletic Club so we could do our classes in tumbling, and then my somebody from the family would come by and pick us up later, my mom or my dad. So yeah, tumbling was, was one of the extracurricular activities that we did, and I remember related to that at the end of the year, they had this may fest right before summer time. And there was a May pole that they had where kids would line up all the way around this pole, and everyone had like a, I guess, like a piece of cloth, colorful cloth, that went up to the top. And some kids would go in a clockwise direction, and the others would go counterclockwise, and they would play the music. And as they were going, one kid would go over the other person, and then they would go under the other. One and then over and then under. So it started to weave. This whole thing that was a big deal. The reason I'm thinking about that was the May fest. The May pole was a big deal. But we also would have tumbling activities. So the students, all of the mats were put out there on the tennis court right next to the swimming pool, and the students would show their tumbling skills. And I remember, I think it was in the, probably the sixth grade, where I broke my record. I was able to do five front hand springs non stop. And that was pretty good, because Fortoso Robledo could do six, and anybody that get could get close to Fortoso, man, they were pretty good. He was my hero in tumbling, but I remember doing five, three. The first three were pretty good. The fourth one wasn't the fifth one. I was really struggling, but I still counted it as five and I broke my record of four.

Annette Rodriguez 36:03

Did they give any prizes at the May Day? Like was it a picnic where people got to watch and cheer and give prizes?

Michael Ruiz 36:11

They had some competitions. It was mostly demonstrations of the kids, work, different activities, food, kids, dancing. I recall them having the part of the activities was where Mrs. Swinson would teach us these kind of square dancing, but you had these two long poles, and they were probably about maybe six feet long, a couple of two by fours, and you would hit twice on the two by fours, and then slide it in the middle, and then hit twice slide it in the middle. So one student was one on one side and another student was on the other side. That's what you did. And then another student was in the middle doing the dancing. And that was a lot of fun. I know the parents really like seeing the kids doing all those and then square dancing, and then the tumbling, and then what are the what other activities they had for us to do?

Annette Rodriguez 37:14

And I heard that the I don't know if this was still true when, when you were there, but at one point the gym was in portable. Was in a portable, and that Miss Swenson was one of the teachers that made sure that there was the equipment.

Michael Ruiz 37:29

Yes, yes, the palm school didn't have a gymnasium. They were actually in the little portables that were outside the back towards the back of the school. And we would go from the school to the portables and go inside, and you didn't have a whole lot of room, because they weren't they didn't have high ceilings, so you very limited on what you could do. Of course, you could play kickball outside, so we did those

activities. And let's see now inside the portables, I think because we were limited, that's probably why she concentrated on the dancing and the square dancing and that sort of thing. Yeah, did

Annette Rodriguez 38:16

you ever join go to any of the square dancing competitions?

Michael Ruiz 38:23

I don't recall doing that. I just recall having to learn a square dance. But I don't recall going to any, any of the competitions at all. No,

Annette Rodriguez 38:33

so if someone were to call a square dance today, would you remember the cotton eye? Joe?

Michael Ruiz 38:42

I think I would remember going around in circles and go to the next person and then go to the next person and where you kind of get your arms together like that, and just kind of go in a circle. I remember that. But that's about all our I remember that. Oh, I do remember, yeah, when there was a pretty girl coming up, you were like, you know, put your arm there a little bit. Pull a little closer. But other than that, now, when it was the boys, it was like, Okay,

Annette Rodriguez 39:18

you didn't want to do si doe, too close,

Michael Ruiz 39:20

not to the boys I didn't

Annette Rodriguez 39:24

so when you when, when your teacher offers to take you to the gymnasium to drive you there? Do you remember that kind of first few times it happened? How, how it felt? Did you feel comfortable? Did you feel worried? Did you know where you were going?

Michael Ruiz 39:44

I was a little apprehensive the first time, but because I was with my brother, I felt safe, Miss with Miss Swenson. She was our PE teacher. Had known her for years. I felt safe, and I think she would hang out. With us there for a while, until they corralled us and told us what we were going to do. Then after a few times, it was something to look forward to. Yeah,

Annette Rodriguez 40:12

and so did your your parents were both working. Did they get to see you at the May Day parade, or day the May Day celebration, did they get to see you tumbling?

Michael Ruiz 40:27

Yes, they did. I recall, un fact, I believe I have some eight millimeter footage that my dad shot of of the May fest one year, and I'm looking for that, trying to pull it out. So, yeah, they had a chance to go at the

end of the year to watch us. That was, that was a big deal for us as we were, you know, we were really proud of our tumbling activities and the May pole and then the dancing and square dancing that we'll learn. So it was a neat thing to show off our skills, so to speak.

Annette Rodriguez 41:07

And your parent, your dad, brought the camera.

Michael Ruiz 41:11

Dad brought the camera. Yeah, he brought the camera to to photo. I guess I can't say video tape, because it wasn't video, but to capture the moving pictures, yeah.

Annette Rodriguez 41:25

So when you think back to all of this, how much time if you think in a day, right the when you wake up and the time of a day, how much do you think you spent with palm school, how much of your day when you were in first grade to sixth grade? When you think about, you know, the time in class, and then the time, whether it was safety patrol or doing other activities,

Michael Ruiz 41:56

let's see palm school. When I think of that, it took up probably most of the day. We didn't live very far. We lived, you know, relatively close to palm school on on East third and Waller Street. It was probably less than a 10 minute walk. And then when we moved to Holly street on comal and Holly, that was probably a 12 minute walk. Maybe wasn't very far at all, so it didn't take too much time getting there. Of course, we'd spend our time there all day long, while we were while school was going on, and then we'd come home. But I do remember, I do remember when I graduated from Palm school and I went to Martin junior high school. I missed palm school. I really did. I, in fact, I remember one time when I was in the seventh grade school was out at Martin junior high school. I remember walking to palm school after junior high because I missed it so much. I walked all the way to palm school and just walk the halls. I just wanted to, I don't know, I missed it so much. I wanted to have that feeling of walking the halls. I was there for six years, first through six, so I just wanted to have that feeling of being there again. And I did that like two or three times, until one time, one teacher said, What are you doing here? And I said, Oh, nothing. She goes, Well, it's too late. You're not supposed to be here. I think she thought I was in the sixth grade, but she goes, yeah, it's too late. And so after that, I didn't go. But I really, really missed it. In fact, even to this day, you know, I could say that I have dreams about palm school. Probably the last dream I had about palm school was maybe six months ago, and that's just walking through the halls, the wooden floors, the creaking. I remember all those things, and in my dream, I'm walking to different classes to see who's in there, and I'm walking to the towards the principal's office. I don't go into the principal's office because I knew I had to stay away from that place as a kid. But yeah, I really, it really, really had an impact on me growing up, and I really missed it a lot. That's how I know that I really missed it is because I would actually leave the junior high and go back to palm school. And then I remember, even when I was going to UT, I even went back to the building to see what it looks like. Now, you know, just wanted to go in. I did. I wasn't able to see the whole school because there were some offices inside there. So I saw a part of the school. And I was just like, thinking back about all the kids that I went to school with there, thinking about Mr. Martinez, the the

janitor, and Mr. Kimball, the other janitor. And just like, Man, look, I went to school here just to, I don't know, I mean that that school had a huge impact on me.

Annette Rodriguez 45:22

Tell us more about Mr. Kimball and Mr. Martinez.

Michael Ruiz 45:25

Mr. Martinez. I remember him always in the cafeteria. You'd see him in the halls every once in a while, but he was always in the cafeteria cleaning up after the kids, kind of sweeping up. I Yeah, and throwing out the trash from the kids would bring their trays and put them down and throw out the trash, and then take the trays and silverware to another area where they had them clean. I remember him distinctly. And then Mr. Kimball, I think he might have been in maintenance. And I remember one time I had to take a book or something or drop it off to him in in an area of the school where kids weren't allowed to go. I remember walking into this room was like stacks and stacks of books, and walking all I saw a light towards the corner, walking all the way to the back to where the light was. And I said, Hey, Mr. Kimball, I'm supposed to bring you this. And he said, Okay. And I gave him the book or something, and started walking out. I'm like, wow, I get to be in this room right here that nobody gets to go in. I thought that was really, really cool. Yeah, and then yeah, I remember those two gentlemen from cleaning, cleaning, helping clean, maintain. I think they were the custodians of the of the of the school, I did want to mention also the whenever you went to the cafeteria, I recall there were some chimes that were on the wall part of the cafeteria near the line where you would get your food. And I remember you would get in line get your food, and your whole class would go sit down, and one student would get to hit the chimes because the chimes where everybody got quiet. Everybody froze when the chimes were were hit, because that's when you said your prayer. So I remember, yeah, it was just kind of a big deal. You get to hit the chimes. There was, believe, there was, like four of them. And I remember it was like, all was ingrained in me, like probably most of the students, you'd be throwing away your trash. Somebody hits the chimes, and you have your napkin right here, and you're getting ready to drop it in the trash can, and you're just like frozen, because the chimes were hit, and you have to stay frozen until the prayer ended, and then the prayer would stop, and then you drop your trash. That was kind of funny. I remember one time this one kid. He hit the chime so hard that I think he broke the little drum stick. I mean, he bang those things. I don't know what was going on, but the teacher, I remember the teacher looking up and, well, she scolded. She scolded him afterwards, but it definitely got everybody's attention, that was for sure.

Annette Rodriguez 48:43

Did you ever get a chance to do the chimes?

Michael Ruiz 48:46

I got a chance to do the chimes. I felt special that day because I got a chance to do the charms. Yeah,

Annette Rodriguez 48:54

And when the kids were praying, were they praying on their own? Was there a prayer everyone said together.

Michael Ruiz 49:00

It was a prayer that everyone said together, a real short prayer. But all the kids said the same thing, yeah. Nobody prayed on their own. Seems like it at the time. You know, prayer in school was okay, and then kind of shifted, and seems like, we might be going back to that again.

Annette Rodriguez 49:21

And what about the food? Did you take your your own lunches? Or did you get lunch at school?

Michael Ruiz 49:29

Mostly at school, every once in a while, I would take a lunch, but mostly at school. Remember having a lunch card so you would pay at the beginning of the week. You'd go in there before school started, and you would pay the lady who collected the money, and then she would write on your card that you were paid for the week. Remember learning that from my brother, because he already knew how to do all of that. I. You pay. So once you'd go through the line, you would you'd get to the front where the cash register was, and she see that you didn't have any money. So she says, What's your name? And you tell her name. Had a little box. She pull out the card, and she'd put a little check mark on the little box. Where, where you had, you know, for the day you had eaten, for the day, the smells of the cafeteria. Every once in a while, maybe every 10-15, years, I get that, I go somewhere and I'm like, oh, that's the smell of palm school cafeteria. It's so strange. It just the smell comes up and it just takes you back. Immediately. You just like, palm school smell. And I'm like, I wish I could capture that. Yeah. So eating cafeteria was always fun because you were just sitting there eating with your friends and stuff. Yeah,

Annette Rodriguez 51:08

that smell? Is it a food smell? Is it a smell of, of like a cleaning product? Do you? Do you? Can you? It's locate that smell.

Michael Ruiz 51:17

It's, it's definitely a food smell, not a cleaning product smell, it was definitely a food smell. I recall, I recall that, and I recall always having plums was always on the menu. Purple plums were always on the menu. Fridays was fish day. I remember having the fish and spinach corn bread. I remember one time choking on spinach. I don't know I was probably in the third or fourth grade, like probably just talking too much, and some of it was in my mouth and some of it was down here. And that was the first experience ever of actually feeling like I was choking. I couldn't breathe. But after, I don't know, seemed like forever. It's probably only about six or seven seconds, it finally went down and I could not eat spinach for about seven years after that, it wasn't the taste, it was the the thought of choking, and I couldn't eat corn bread either, because I was eating the spinach with the corn bread. So I always had to pick the the roll instead of the corn bread. Took me a while before, before I got out of that. But, yeah, that was, that was a scary moment for me.

Annette Rodriguez 52:46

Was there a school nurse? Or Did anyone call for help? Do you

Michael Ruiz 52:49

no no? Because it happened so quickly, I don't think anyone even noticed that I was, wasn't like, making a big deal of it. It happened pretty quickly. So I doubt that anyone actually noticed. Nobody said anything. So yeah,

Annette Rodriguez 53:06

did you spend any time in the library?

Michael Ruiz 53:09

Ooh, the library? Yes, the librarian was Miss Cyrus. Miss Cyrus held a tight ship in that library. I remember as a kid going in there first or second grade, and she explained to you clearly that you were not going to dog ear the pages on the book. You are not going to write in the book with pencil or color or anything, she made it very, very clear that you were not going to do that. So I was afraid of Miss Iris. So she kept us on her toes. She taught us how to use the card catalog. I remember, that she taught us that if you were looking at books and you were pulling a book out, you pull the book out the one next to it, you rotate it at 90 degrees, so that when you put that book back, you know where to put it back, and then you straighten up the other one. Yeah, she was she was strict, very strict. She I didn't see her smile much, but maybe because she was always after the students about books and stuff. I remember one time I had an overdue book, I had to pay a little fine. And then another particular time I walked up there to check out a book. She goes, you haven't turned in this other book. And I said, Really? She goes, Yes, so I hadn't turned it in for a while. So I had to pay for the book, and you had to pay again, you didn't have to pay for all at once. But you would come there every every time you you had a chance. Days you would go pay a nickel or a dime, whatever you had. So that's what I would do, selling bottles, saving some of that money, my present money, I had to use it to pay for the book. So I had probably made maybe three payments on it. I know I owed a lot more, because I remember going in there one time to pay for it, and her assistant that was helping her file books, do paperwork, that sort of thing. She was there too, and I remember going in there to pay for the book, and Ms Cyrus pulled out the card. She goes, "this book has been paid for". And I'm like, "it has?" she goes "Yes", so I wasn't going to argue with the Cyrus, but I'm like, I was thinking to myself, but I've only made like, two or three payments, and turns out that the lady in the back paid that book for me. I'll never forget that she she did that because she winked at me, she smiled and she winked. And I'm like, Man, at the time, I didn't know. I was just trying to figure out, how did this happen? It wasn't until, I don't know, months later or something, that I realized and she had the heart to do that for me, and that was that had a lasting impact on me. It made me feel like some people can't afford stuff, so you have to go out and help them. And so it had such an impact on me that that's what I did in my life. If anybody was in need of finances, money for something, then I learned to help them, and that's what she did for me. And she changed, you know, she changed my life in that regard. So, I mean, that's one thing that palm school had a huge impact on me in that regard, with her, and, oh, I mean, I remember to this day, so obviously, obviously, it had that huge impact.

Annette Rodriguez 57:32

And and you understanding, without her saying anything, the kindness she had shown to you, and she did it without taking credit.

Michael Ruiz 57:44

She did it without taking credit. All she did was smile. And, you know, I just, I was just like, wow, you know, you know, at the time, I just focused on, how did this happen, you know. But then when I looked back, I remember her smiling and winking, and so after a while, that's when I realized, like it was her, you know, because I know Miss Cyrus didn't do it. I know Miss Cyrus, she would have made me pay every single penny of that book because she collected a money when when they were late, so when the book was lost, she was going to collect it. But, yeah, that that had a huge impact on me and and my thinking about helping people.

Annette Rodriguez 58:34

Did you ever tell anyone at that time about it? Did you tell your family about that.

Michael Ruiz 58:41

Never told anybody about that. The only person I believe I ever told was my wife, Diana. And yeah, it's, it's just something that I kept to myself. And, yeah, it's just, I don't, I don't remember sharing that with anyone.

Annette Rodriguez 59:03

Wow. So what about the swimming pool? Did you ever spend time in the pool?

Michael Ruiz 59:09

Yes, we spent time going to the swimming pool. We used to swim there in the summertime. I remember, and there was a, I spent time at the swimming pool, in the pool with friends in the summertime. And then there was also another like a stone structure there on the feeder road of I 35 South bound, which I believe is still there, because passed by there a couple of days ago, and I know my wife gets tired every time we pass by palm school. Say, honey, look the big oak tree. That's where all the kids used to hang out. I. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of acorns all around the tree. That's where we would play. That's where we would sit by the tree. That's where we would chase each other and, oh, look, honey, the palm school, the stone building is still there. That's where we used to play kickball. You know, all of those memories come back every time I go by there, and if I'm on, coming from downtown Austin, going east, back to my mom's house on East First Street, palm schools to the left, and I say, Look, honey, there's the cafeteria. That's where I used to eat. But she's never complained, so I guess she loves me.

Annette Rodriguez 1:00:42

Do you remember making certain games with those acorns, or certain games around the tree? I remember

Michael Ruiz 1:00:47

gathering bunch of acorns as many as we could, and tried to see who would have the biggest pile of acorns. And sometimes when the teacher wasn't looking, throwing them at our buddies. Yeah, I have wonderful memories around that tree, hugging the tree. It was a big, big, huge oak tree, sitting next to it, leaning up against it, just touching the bark on the tree.

Annette Rodriguez 1:01:19

Yeah, could you ever climb it? It's really a huge tree.

Michael Ruiz 1:01:24

Couldn't really climb it because the bottom was, you know, basically straight up and down, so that you could climb a climb. The roots were pretty big. So you could step on the roots, I guess you just, you should say step, but no, you couldn't really climb it.

Annette Rodriguez 1:01:46

Do you remember your friends names?

Michael Ruiz 1:01:50

Let's see, yes, I remember Benedict Solis. Was really, I was really close to him for Fortoso Robledo. He was the guy in tumbling. I remember, let's see. There was two guys named Paul Hernandez, Paul Hernandez one, and Paul Hernandez two. Another guy named Ben Trujillo, a gentleman named Tony Galindo. My cousin went to school there, Victor Ruiz, but he was in a different I never had him for any classes. For some reason, let's see girls. Maybe I shouldn't say them. No, I do. I do. Remember Dominga Perez, Maria Palomares, Laura Hernandez. There was a couple of, I believe there was two, Laura Hernandez's, i Those are the ones that just kind of quickly come to mind. I guess those are the ones that I was interacted with more.

Annette Rodriguez 1:03:11

And were they in the neighborhood too, or did most of your interacting with your friends happen at school?

Michael Ruiz 1:03:16

Yeah, most of the interactions happened at school. I don't think any of them happened outside of school. I don't recall. I know Benedict lived on Rainey street, so there was no reason for me to come back to his house, and he wouldn't go to my house because it was farther away. I know Ben Trujillo used to live right off of way up on the hill, right off of I 35 probably somewhere between 11th or 12th Street in that in that area. It's all changed now. Yeah, so we mostly interacted. Oh, remember Danny Camacho because he lived on Haskell Street, probably about one, one block away from me. Yeah?

Annette Rodriguez 1:04:08

So on weekends, did you spend those weekends with your family?

Michael Ruiz 1:04:13

Weekends was mostly family, yeah, pretty much. So I don't ever remember hanging out with students on the weekends, but pretty much family the whole time. Yes,

Annette Rodriguez 1:04:28

did you all ever go to the park or other places in the neighborhood on weekends?

Michael Ruiz 1:04:34

Yes, we'd go to we lived so close to the Colorado River. We were, let's see, Holly Street is probably about maybe three blocks away, north of the Colorado River. So my dad, my brother and I would go there quite a bit to fish. Caught a lot of perch, some cat fish, bass. We did a lot of fishing there at the Colorado and then sometimes we would go to the long horn dam, which was, you know, right there between, well, it was right there on Pleasant Valley. We would fish, the time it was called Town Lake. So it was between I 35 bridge and long horn dam bridge. So we did all our fishing. There lots of fishing, tons of fishing. And I don't know, maybe I just became more aware. But I remember one time putting a worm on a hook and thinking, man, "what am I doing to this poor worm, you know, I don't know if I feel good about this". And then I remember fishing from the bridge one time, and I remember feeling my pole move a little bit, so I yanked it like this, and I'm like, "I got a fish. I got a fish!" and I reeled it all the way up from the water down at bottom to the top of the bridge, and I pulled up the fish I had actually caught, it on the side, not on the mouth. And I think that was a turning point for me, thinking, "Oh man, this poor fish, you know, if I would have caught hooked him here on the mouth. It probably would have been okay, but I'm sure that it hurt coming all the way up with the gravity pulling him down". So after that, I really didn't want to fish anymore. I think I got all the fishing out of my system. I remember, you know, and now people ask me, "Hey, you know, you live close to the coast. You want to go fishing?" "No, I don't want to fish anymore. I'm done fishing. I did enough fishing for a lifetime." And I don't know if it was because we did so much as a kid, or because I finally realized I don't think I want to do that to those animals or insects.

Annette Rodriguez 1:07:03

How old were you when that happened?

Michael Ruiz 1:07:07

I was probably about, I'd say maybe 12. Probably about 12, I would estimate, yes.

Annette Rodriguez 1:07:19

So it made a huge impact for you to think about the suffering of

Michael Ruiz 1:07:22

Yeah, made it a huge impact to think about the suffering of that fish. I mean, because it was a long way down from the top of the bridge all the way to the water, and I was just thought, Man, that poor thing all the way up. So, yeah, I, I don't know if I tried to get the hook out. I can't remember if my dad helped me or not, but I didn't like what I saw, but I definitely let him go back in the water. And I don't know if we cut the string or whatever, but yeah,

Annette Rodriguez 1:08:01

you released him. You released him. So let's you mentioned graduation day, and I think that's that's different than your may fest, right? So you were talking about graduation, would this be graduation each year, or graduation from six grade?

Michael Ruiz 1:08:24

You're asking about graduation from Palm school. Yeah, graduation from Palm school, that was a big deal. I don't think I wanted I don't think I wanted to graduate, and I don't think I knew that until I started

going to Martin junior high school. I kind of wanted to stay there because it was such a loving environment. I don't know if that's the word, but a comfortable environment, I felt pretty good there my my classes. I felt that I could do the work. And it's just a comfortable feeling being there.

Annette Rodriguez 1:09:15

And so as you were getting near your graduation, did you share those feelings with anyone?

Michael Ruiz 1:09:22

No, never. I never shared those. Not, not a single soul. I think this is probably the first time I've ever shared that. Yeah, they never told anyone about that, just something that I kept inside.

Annette Rodriguez 1:09:39

So what did it feel like to graduate on that day?

Michael Ruiz 1:09:43

I guess excitement like, wow, I finished the sixth grade. Now I'm gonna go to Martin, but I have my brother, so, yeah, I was excited to go to Martin. Because, of course, you always seems like one always feels like, Okay. Now I'm a second grader. Now I'm not a first grade, okay. Now I'm a third grader. I'm not a second okay. Now I'm fifth grader. I'm not a fourth grader. So you feel like you're maturing. So now I'm going to junior high, seventh, eighth and ninth grade. Wow, that's going to be an experience. I was excited.

Annette Rodriguez 1:10:28

Did your brother tell you what to expect?

Michael Ruiz 1:10:32

Yes, he did. He warned me that you don't just have one teacher all day long. He says you're going to have several teachers, and I'm like, several teachers, how does that work goes? Yeah, you're going to have about an hour in each class, and you're going to go to all these different classes. And I was like, wow, that's going to be cool. I'm going to get to hang out with the seventh and eighth, ninth graders. So I was excited. And lucky for me, Martin Junior High was one block away. So, you know, I could wake up at 8:25, and the school started at 8:30. I'd wake up at 8:25 brush my teeth, wash my face, and still get to school on time. You were right there. I was right there.

Annette Rodriguez 1:11:25

So when you talk about, you know, missing it and not realizing how much you'd miss it, and even now, having these, these dreams, what do you see in those dreams? You go from room to room, do you see old friends there? Do you see old teachers there?

Michael Ruiz 1:11:42

in my dreams? I've I'm interested to see who's in the classrooms. I feel like, what's around the corner like I'm not sure what to anticipate. I I don't I do see some teachers sometimes, but the I don't think they're the ones that were my my teachers, but I do see teachers teaching the kids, and I'm looking into the room, and they turn around to look to see who it is, and I'm walking the halls on the first floor.

Actually remember having a dream going up into the second floor, walking up the cement stairs and going to the second floor. But most of the time it's on the first floor. I have dreams of of being in the back of the school, outside where the pool was, where the oak tree was, where the stone building was playing, walking all along the for some reason, I don't know why, walking on the feeder Road, walking south, looking towards palm school to my right, just walking in that area and walking through behind palm school on the street behind it, we're next to the creek, just just moments of being there as I was when I was a kid and it feels peaceful. Feels peaceful most of the time.

Annette Rodriguez 1:13:27

That's beautiful. Yeah, that's incredible. So, so what kind of foundation for your relationship to education? Did did palm school set because it feels like your family set that also so. So how can you think about this is the foundation for for your educational journey afterward?

Michael Ruiz 1:13:54

I'd say the family had a huge impact on me in terms of education, always encouraging, always encouraging us. Even as a kid, I remember in the second grade, my uncle Dan Ruiz, you're going to go to college, you're going to you're going to finish school, you're going to graduate from high school, and you're going to go to college. Even as a second grader, I remember that he they really instilled that in us. So that's what I believed I was going to do. And I palm school was very instrumental in that. And then I went to Martin junior high school and got my education there, I happened to live like right on the edge of the divider that divided students going Austin High School and Johnston High School, Comal street, I believe was the divider. Could have gone to Austin High School. I wish I would have gone to. Austin High School, Johnston High School, I don't think I got the education that that I should have gotten. I do know that when I arrived to UT, I was very unprepared for for college. Yeah, I wasn't, I wasn't prepared for college, so I had to, I had to work not twice as hard, but five times as hard, because I was competing with these students in these engineering classes that you know had already taken calculus physics in high school. Okay, I didn't have that in high school. These kids had taken computer classes in in their at their schools, and all we had was a little teletype machine that hooked up to the University of Texas. You would submit your your computer BASIC program, and then maybe the next day it would come back to you, you could get the results. So, I mean, you know, Johnson High School was good if, if you wanted to do brick laying, radio/TV repair, automobile repair, cosmetology, all those traits that was, it was a good school for that, printing, but I wanted to be an engineer. I didn't want to do any of those things. So UT kicked my butt, no doubt about it. It did, but and it took me a long time to graduate. It wasn't four years, but I did get into luckily, with the help of my uncle Buddy, he introduced me to cooperative engineering program. So that's where you work. One semester you go to school, the next work. One semester you go to school, the next while you're in college, and then eventually graduate. So I got into that with NASA, and I, like I said, my grades weren't that good. And I remember I was on Scholastic probation once at UT, and the I think somebody from UT called My supervisor at NASA and told him, and I remember my supervisor at NASA saying, "We don't care what kind of grade he has at UT". He's doing excellent work here. So I was like, Oh, thank God. So lucky for me. I graduated in 1984 from UT. And then I continued my employment at NASA for 41 years, until December 31, 2021, so when I retired and from a wonderful a wonderful place to work. Probably, I know NASA's the government does studies. NASA is one of the best places to work in the entire United

States government. So and thank goodness to you know family, who encouraged the education, friends, some teachers and and the NASA people that I worked with are just fabulous.

Annette Rodriguez 1:18:31

I'm thinking about what that journey must have been like for you. You're reading at an 11th grade level in fourth grade, you're really excelling at Palm school, and then you get to UT, and you're having kind of the opposite experience, right? Exactly? How did that feel? How did you make sense of that?

Michael Ruiz 1:18:56

It was, I didn't realize that in high school, the education that I was getting was not preparing me for UT, except for one teacher, Mr. Setsec, he taught English, and I tried so hard and working in his classes, and all I ever got was a C. I was getting really good grades in in all my other classes, and I worked really hard in his class, he goes, I'm not, because I remember, he says, I'm not, I'm not preparing you students for some Podunk College. I'm preparing you for UT, Texas A&M, wherever you want to go. And he he was right, because when I came to UT, I got A's, but math, physics, oh, man, that was I was freaking out because I had never gotten an F before, ever. So I was just like, I was blown away. It was very. Very, very difficult. I remember coming to the ECJ building here. I hated that building because it brought back bad memories of of struggling and struggling and struggling. I remember actually calling my my teacher in high school to help me with physics, and she says, "Why don't you come on, she was so nice. Come to my house and and I'll see, you know, see what I can I'll see if I can help you". Well, you know, she couldn't really help me, because then she would have to study what I was studying. And so I did that a couple of times, and that didn't really work, but, yeah, I was definitely not prepared. I was, I mean, it threw me for a loop. It really did. I had to get out for a little while because I'm like, I don't know if I can do this. There was a lot of times I really wanted to quit and not not go to UT because it was just too, too difficult for me. And that's when I knew that I wasn't prepared. And when I saw the all these other students that already had these, they had them in high school. So, you know, I think in high school I had, I don't know, trigonometry, geometry, didn't have any calculus at all whatsoever, so that I felt like I was, like, way behind in preparation, and I was, but I didn't know that at the time. You don't know that you don't have anything to compare to. So you don't know. You don't know until you get there. And when I got here, it was, it was a culture shock, too. Plus, you know, I grew up in East Austin, was Mexican Americans and African Americans, and then I got to UT, and it was, whoa. Where did all these white people come from? And it was a, it was a challenge getting used to that. There was a little, you know, I think there was a little discrimination, I suspect that, and I felt it a little bit. I remember going to one of my to try to get advice for one of my engineering classes, and one of the teachers, I remember, there was a bunch of students waiting in line a long time to get advised, and I recall students in front of me, "come on in". The the the guy that was gonna advise, "come on in. How can I help you. What do you" Okay, yeah, good, good, good, okay. Next, Next guy would go in, "okay, yeah, what do you need?" Okay, and he get advice. And "next next", there was the guy in front of me, come on in. "What can I do for you today?" And he would give him his information. And then I was next. He goes next, and I'd walk up there. He goes, "What do you want?" I'm like, "Well, I want to get advised. Well, let me see your paper." He was like, like, wow. Why does his attitude change? And so I gave him the paperwork. "All right, here, next. Come on in. Come on in, come over here and have a seat". And I'm like, Oh, what was that all about? You know, I felt like, Wow. I feel like somebody doesn't want me here. He might have thought that I was Iranian, because I had, we had some problem. The US had

some problems with Iran during that time, and I had dark hair, and I know there was some Iranians protesting. Maybe it was that, I don't know, but I know I didn't feel accepted at the time. So that was you add lack of preparation, and then you add that to the mix, and I felt like, Man, I don't belong here. I really don't belong here. So I wanted to quit a lot of times. I remember being in studying at the library, you know, thinking, I don't want to do this anymore. But lucky for me, in the maybe eighth grade. When I was about 14, I got a summer job with my uncle doing form wrecking. That's where you go out and they pour these cement forms for the new houses. And there was, of course, this wood kept all the cement together to form the foundation. So our job was to go over there, take off all the boards, take out all the nails, stack them on the big truck, and take them back to the place where they were going to recycle them. And that's what we did all day long. And I remember thinking, man. Man, this is mindless. This is mindless. But I did it because, you know, making \$2 an hour, that was good money for me. So when I was in the library here at UT and I wanted to quit. I thought, okay, if I quit, what kind of job am I going to get? And I would think back to that form wrecking job, and I'm like, I don't want to do that. No, no, no, no, no, no, I am not going to do that. So that Job was a blessing in disguise, because it showed me that how important an education was. So I said, Okay, kept studying, plowed through my studies, and I couldn't believe it when I was a senior here at UT. I'm like, oh my god, I'm a senior. I'm going to graduate and and I finally did, and I was just so happy because I already had a job working at NASA. I mean, I got some offers for from Texas Instruments and IBM, but I chose NASA because I felt loyal to them, because they gave me the opportunity. But yeah, it was, it was tough

Annette Rodriguez 1:26:24

when, before you graduated from UT, did you ever find a community at UT? Did you ever find people that that you felt like you were saying there's this cultural difference, right? And how did you find those people? How did you find your people? Lucky for me,

Michael Ruiz 1:26:41

there was a group called PI sigma pi, and I believe they still exist. And it was an engineering group that a couple of the guys went to my high school to encourage the students to go to college and get a degree. And so they're the ones that told me about, when you get to UT, you look up this organization and you can, you know, be a part of this. So I became a member of pi sigma pi to, you know, and I felt, I felt accepted there, because the majority of them were Mexican Americans. So I felt a connection people that looked like me, people that cared about things that I cared about. And so that was that was a big, huge help. And in fact, that that impacted me so much that when I once I graduated and started working at NASA, I became a member of a couple of organizations, the Society of Mexican American engineers and scientists. And it was M, A, E, S, M, MAES, and then another group, ship, SHPE Society of let's see Hispanic Professional Engineers, yeah. So I don't join both of those schools very involved with the my US organization, and I wanted to give back to the community, just like those guys came to my school. So I worked really hard. Became a member of the Houston chapter. They had chapters all over the United States became, finally became like Secretary Treasurer, and then I became president of the organization. We hosted scholarship banquets because we knew, I knew that there were students that all they needed was a little bit of money to get their foot in in the door at college. They, a lot of them just didn't have the funds to go. So we wanted to give them an opportunity just to get their foot in the door. So we raised money for for scholarships for the students and that that was my way of giving back to the community. I did that I don't know, for maybe 20 years, helped students, and I would

go as a, you know, a representative, NASA, I would go talk to the schools to encourage the kids to, you know, study engineering if you want to, you know, you can do it. You know, if I did it, you can do it. So to me, I wanted them to see someone that looked like them. I think that's very important. And I spent a lot of time doing outreach for NASA, and I would usually go to the schools that I knew were calling Title One, a lot of poor students go there because the other schools, they didn't need me talking to them. They had money the kids were going to go to college, the parents could afford to pay. I wanted to encourage those that didn't have the, you know, the means. So I would always encourage them. And I went to a lot of schools around the Houston area. I actually came to Austin to do one at Martin junior high school a few years ago. I've been trying to do one at Johnston High School, where I went to high school, but I think they changed the name to something else. But yeah, I really wanted to give back into the Austin community, because these were my roots, but it was easier to do it around the Houston area, because I could take my my NASA materials with me, some they had these astronaut helmets. The kids love the astronaut helmets, and they love the astronaut gloves. And I even had, one time, some actual moon rock that I took to an event. And they just, they just love that. And so I always wanted to encourage them. You know, if you want to get into math, science, engineering, a STEM field, arts, whatever doesn't matter, but you got to finish, you got to finish school. You have to graduate. So we always encourage them. And so like, Okay, we encourage them they graduate. What can we do now? Well, let's give them scholarship money just to help them get their foot in the door. That's all they needed. And so that's what I did for a long, long time.

Annette Rodriguez 1:31:36

So when you were having this, this journey at UT, where you're finding your people. You're finding your your engineering organizations. What are your parents doing at that point? Are you talking to them about school? Are you talking to them about the work they're doing?

Michael Ruiz 1:31:55

My parents were always working, so they they had to work to support the family lucky. I really didn't talk to them about it. I do remember like when I was in junior high, and I could ask my dad for help with with some of the classes and stuff. But once I got to UT, I realized I can't ask him, and he doesn't know anything about trigonometry or geometry. He, you know, he doesn't know anything about physics. I couldn't ask them anymore. So I got so desperate, I asked my my former teacher from high school. So, yeah, that was they weren't really around for that, although they encouraged it, they weren't really around for me to discuss that. It's kind of quiet. I kept, pretty much kept stuff to myself.

Annette Rodriguez 1:32:52

So you were sort of having this, this struggle and figuring out how to overcome these challenges very much alone when you were at UT?

Michael Ruiz 1:33:02

Oh, yeah and I did feel very much alone when I was when I was at UT, very, very much alone, because I felt like I didn't who could I turn to? You know, who was going to help me? Nobody in the family knew about any of the classes that I took, I couldn't ask any of them, so I couldn't afford tutoring. Didn't have the means for that. I mean, lucky, Luckily though my brother, who was one year ahead of me, he got a scholarship, a four year paid scholarship to here at UT. So that was that was really, really good for him.

I got a letter in the mail that that said I was going to get a similar scholarship. But then they found out, they said, Oh, we're sorry. We can't give it to two people from the same family. So I was like, oh, man, okay, so, so I just, you know, worked to pay my way through school. Just, that's what I had to do. So that's what I did. I worked part time at, see, I worked at the City of Austin electric department for a while. I worked for the city of Austin library department where I was a page at the Henry Terrazas branch library on East first and named after my uncle, Henry Terrazas. And then I never did work at Daniel Ruiz library, who was another uncle, but yeah, it's just had to work and put my way through through college that way,

Annette Rodriguez 1:34:45

I voted at Terrazas, because I live off of North Pleasant Valley. So okay, I know that library Well, yeah, tell me about your uncles that the libraries were named for. Okay,

Michael Ruiz 1:34:57

well, my Uncle Henry Terrazas. US. Was a Marine. He was a brand new marine. It was stationed in California. I remember a few things about him, not a whole lot, because I was pretty young, but he lived there on Holly street, and I remember him going to the Marines and joining the Marines. And I know my grandparents and the family members were really worried about him going to Vietnam, because that's where he was headed. Unfortunately, they had some fires in California, and they called some of the Marines to go out there, and he got so burned, he died of those, those wounds to his body. So they, I think, when they were going to name the library here, they wanted from, wanted it to be from someone in the community. So hence, his name was selected. And then, of course, my Uncle Dan. He was Uncle Dan, He was amazing. He encouraged. He was probably the main one who encouraged my brother and I to to get an education and to go to college. And like I said, even at the second grade, I knew I'm going to college. I'm going to college. I know that. So he was very instrumental in that. My Dan, uncle, Dan, I remember him running for justice of peace, precinct four. I campaigned for him quite a lot. I mean, I mean, I campaign for a lot, a lot of the Mexican Americans did. We're here in Austin. John Trevino, who was running for city council, Gonzalo Barrientos, State Representative, Richard Moya county commissioner, Buddy Ruiz state represent all of those. I spent a lot of time going door to door, campaigning, putting out leaflets, walking house to house, just, you know, lots of lots and lots and lots of campaign making signs with the silk screen because, you know, they didn't have a whole lot of money, so the campaigns were mostly from volunteers. But yeah, politics, I dealt with a lot of politics here in Austin during that time, like maybe I was probably around 12, 13, 14, something like that.

Annette Rodriguez 1:37:48

Wow. So you got involved early? I got involved very early. Yeah. What was the first campaign? And how did you get involved? Let's see,

Michael Ruiz 1:37:55

I would say the first campaign was probably Richard Moya campaign. We would help distribute leaflets and go house to house, asking people, especially on the day of voting, ask people, did you vote? Can you go vote for Richard Moya and I just did all that. I remember my uncle Dan's campaign being at his campaign headquarters, making signs, using the silk screen and making phone calls. I remember they had these big, huge lists of names of registered voters, and I'll just call them up. Have you voted today?

Make sure you vote for Dan Ruiz. In fact, I brought a Dan Ruiz bumper sticker with me, so it's, I want to give it to his son today who, who then doesn't have one, I don't think he'd ever seen one before. So it's going to be a really, really cool thing to give that to him.

Annette Rodriguez 1:39:05

That is really special, that is really special we I know that that when they see this, this old campaign memorabilia, it's it's especially surprising to folks of generations after to see how politically active the generations you know before us have been. And you know, we all think we invented activism for organizing, right? But to see this organizing so early on, and for you to get involved at the age of 12, yeah, it's incredible.

Michael Ruiz 1:39:39

It was, I was very young, not only the politics. I mean, because I knew it was important. We needed representation in city council and the school board. I think it was Gus Garcia. We needed representation at the state level, the precinct level. So, yeah, that's why I got. Involved and, and, plus, you know, on whole, another different story was the the the Austin Chicano Huelga, the Economy Furniture Strike, which really was a catalyst for Mexican Americans getting elected to political offices here in Austin, Texas, the strikers were a big, huge help. A lot of them volunteered on the campaigns, and I think that was what really started the movement here. I remember when they got Cesar Chavez to come to Austin. I've got pictures of my grandma, my grandpa, with Cesar Chavez and my grand father spoke at the state capitol a few times on top of this community center. He spoke there, you know, encouraging people talking about the strike, and he was a big he was a big catalyst in all that too, because he worked at the economy furniture, and he'd been there since, like, he knew the owner, and he had been there a long, long time when the owner first got started, so it was a big deal for him to go on strike being that close to the owner.

Annette Rodriguez 1:41:32

This. Do you remember any discussions about how he felt about that, about how if he felt conflicted, or there was some questions of loyalty.

Michael Ruiz 1:41:43

Yes, I recall the first time they had talked about going on strike. I believe the owner, Mr. Milton Smith, had told him, you know, because the the people had, the workers had already said, Look, we, you know, we need better wages, working conditions, vacation, basic pay, all that. And so he, my grandfather, had spoken to Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith told him, we're going to take care of all of that. Don't you worry. You know, we'll, we'll, we'll take care of it. So he convinced this originally, the workers don't go on strike. Mr. Smith says he's, he's gonna, he's gonna take care of y'all. Well, that never materialized. And so he felt, he felt like, man, you know, what did I do here? You know, I was promised that these things were going to happen for these people. They didn't go on strike. So he felt really bad about that. So finally, years later, when, when they decided to go on strike again. Tried to get the union recognized. He went on strike. He says, I'm I'm not going to do that again. So, I mean, and he was like, I think he was getting ready to retire. So that was a that was a huge sacrifice, but he went on strike, and that's why he was a huge proponent of talking about the strike and talking about helping the workers and and then that kind of started the movement here in Austin and and for for Richard Moya, who I

believe is The first Mexican American to be elected official. And then, you know, Gonzalo Barrientos and Gus Garcia and John Trevino, city council, just all of that.

Annette Rodriguez 1:43:55

How old were you when the strike, this strike that your grandfather participated in starting

Michael Ruiz 1:44:01

I was, I used to walk the picket line with my dad and I, that was in 69, 70 and 71 so I was 12 years old.

Annette Rodriguez 1:44:13

What do you remember about walking that picket line?

Michael Ruiz 1:44:16

Oh well, I got lots of memories of walking that picket line, just hanging out there and walking with my dad. He wanted me to stay they had these two little buildings. The strikers had these two little buildings close to economy furniture, and that's where they would rest when they weren't picketing, either sitting on a bench or if it was cold, they would go inside the buildings. The buildings were kind of like little offices as well, where strikers could come and pick up their strike eight checks when they walked the picket line, because they were hard of work. So this was a huge sacrifice for all of those workers. You know, some of them found part time work. Other ones found some full time work, but it was a huge sacrifice for three years. I mean, can you imagine being on the strike for three years? Just it was really, really tough for them? Yeah, and I remember being at the what we call "picket shacks" with my dad in the summer times. And in fact, once the strike was over, I think my dad acquired one of those "picket shacks" so it still sits at my mom and dad's house there on Holly Street, and it's gonna, it's gonna be on a walking tour of Austin, East Austin. So, yeah, that's a really, really cool thing to have from the strike. I went in it few years ago, and I found the original strikers picket signs, which was really cool. And I've been going through some of my my dad's old stuff, and have names of all the strike I remember a lot of the names because I helped him. He would write the checks for the strike a and he goes, Okay, have we gotten so and so's check written, and I check it off, check it off. So he and I did that together, that that that strike had a big, huge impact. I remember one time my mom getting a phone call, and I know she was disturbed. "What!" I remember her saying, they took your dad to jail? "What? Why?" Apparently, a couple of guys on the picket line had gone over there and pulled a gun on my father while he was picketing. So one they were saying something, and I don't know how they got into an argument. My dad hit one of them here. Guy fell to the ground. His brother was next to him, and he says, shoot him. Shoot him. You shoot that sob. And so the guy pulled the gun out, and while he was on the ground, tried to shoot my dad, but luckily, the my dad found out later that the sheriff told him You lucked out because that that bullet jammed in the chamber, so the guy was actually trying to shoot him. So, you know, a lot of stuff like that happened that was pretty scary for me, for my dad, you know, thinking about man, what if something happens to him? So I got lots of memories of of economy furniture and and the strike and and boycotting. You know, Montgomery Ward st, sold economy furniture, boycotting other stores. Just involved with that as as a young kid, the age of 12, 13, and 14, that's that was when everything happened.

Annette Rodriguez 1:48:03

I'm thinking about how your dad was targeted in that attack, or even how you're describing how he would be distributing the strike aid. So was he in a leadership position where folks knew that that he was one of the folks in charge or in leadership.

Michael Ruiz 1:48:27

You know, I never really thought about why he was targeted, but you make a good point. Perhaps it was because he was, he was in a leadership position. You know, at one point, I know he was the treasurer for for a while, and I know he represented a lot of the employees that had issues with working conditions and pay, and he would represent The employee and go talk to the to the company management about that, so I don't know if he was targeted because of that. That's a good question. I never really thought about that until you brought that up. Perhaps, maybe that's what it was. I don't know what was going on at the picket line at that time.

Annette Rodriguez 1:49:20

I'm thinking too about what a historian he is, to have collected the to have collected the little house and to have collected the picket signs, that's incredible. Yeah,

Michael Ruiz 1:49:31

yeah, I'm glad he did. I have actually some little buttons that say "UIU local, 456", that the strikers would wear. I've got lots of photos of the strikers and them marching down Congress Avenue with the the UIU local 456, banner with the Black Eagle. And in fact, my my parents made that banner. Uh, it's now here at the Benton Latin American collection. And I remember they the day they made that. I remember it was, they laid it, ate out a square on the floor, and they had some black material. I think my dad did the letters and and cut them out, laid them out, made the eagle, and I believe my mom sewed them by hand, every single letter on there and the eagle, she sewed it by hand and put like a little fringe thing around it. I saw it probably about six months ago, took my wife Diana to go see it, and it was really cool. They brought it out. I'm like, Whoa. It's faded quite a bit since then. Of course, it was used quite a bit too. But it was really neat. It was very nice of the staff at the Benson Latin American collection to actually pull it out and let me see it and see some of the old pictures. They also have an original strike on strike sign. Theirs is obviously in much better condition because mine had been sitting in that picket shack for, since 71 but yeah, I've got a lot of little things that I'd like to share about that, in terms of items that that he had, that collected over the years.

Annette Rodriguez 1:51:32

It's incredible how much of that you have. I've only seen pictures of it, so I've never seen any of the any of the original articles. So I have seen that always. One of the pictures we see is everyone there with that with that sign, yes, that sign, with that big banner, yes.

Michael Ruiz 1:51:50

And I just I have also some eight millimeter footage that my dad shot on the picket line, and of some of the strikers that no one's ever seen but but the family members. So at some point I want to share that too. I several years back, probably 25 years ago, converted them from eight millimeter to VHS tape. That was the that was the medium at the time. So now I'm going to have to digitize that tape. So I want to look for those films, because I believe going from, I mean, when I did the transfer, it was just a little

small device, so it's not high resolution at all, but I'd like to maybe give those original films somewhere that they can be stored, and then convert them to electronic form so that everybody can see, you know, the actual folks that were on the picket line and actually picketing,

Annette Rodriguez 1:53:02

yeah. I mean, it's incredible when we have families who preserve that for decades, who preserve those materials for decades, and then allow an archive or a library to preserve it and digitize it and make it available. That is that that kind of care for those materials. It never starts at the archive. It always starts with the family, right?

Michael Ruiz 1:53:28

I was probably influenced by my grandfather, who had an eight millimeter film camera, and he loved capturing images of the family, Easter, get togethers, Halloween. He loved Halloween, because my brother and I would get dressed. We lived in the backyard, so we were pretty close. He loved video taping us. You can see, you can see in the, I should say video tape, because it's not tape capturing the imagery of us. And you can see, as I was getting older, I had this little leopard Halloween costume that fit me perfectly the first year they bought it, and then the second year, it was really tight. And then the third year, they had to cut the feet off the bottom because it wouldn't fit anymore. But I still wore the top part. You could see that in the films, but yeah, he's the one that inspired me to capture imagery, because he did that. So I went and bought me a camera. I have his original eight millimeter film projector still, and that's how I transferred the film to the. Test tape, but I would like to transfer to some type of digital medium now. Yeah, it's he inspired me with that,

Annette Rodriguez 1:55:10

so you can look at yourself over the years at Halloween with your brother and your little costumes. Yes, that's so sweet. Yeah, so sweet. How do you think this? This, this tradition that your grandfather starts and your father continues, and you have this sense of not losing things right, whether it's holding on to the object or the image or the memory. How do you think that affected your educational journey being part of this you know, this strike at that age, what did that teach you that you took with you as you were facing all those educational challenges?

Michael Ruiz 1:56:02

Are you asking about like, the the reason why I kept all of these, this imagery and stuff? I saw that how important it was to maintain those images memories, to be able to go back and look at what the truth was, because You had it right there. I know sometimes my dad captured imagery of the security guard at the economy furniture on picket line, they would try to intimidate the strikers sometimes. He would actually the security guard would go up to him while they were walking the picket line, and, you know, get within 10 feet and pull out his camera and start photographing them. And so, you know, this little things like that that the company did. So my dad, I figured, okay, I'm gonna, they don't believe that the security guards doing that. I'm gonna capture him on film. So he took the camera out there and captured the security guard doing that. Yeah, so we have some films of that. I've got films of the strikers walking the picket line. Films of the strikers at the two little picket they called them picket shacks. Two little picket shacks. So to me, it made me realize, you know, that's really important to have that and to share it with people later, so that they can see it and maintain that history, so that others can see that

how important it was, how important all these things were, the effects that these things had, and the ability that people now are enjoying the sacrifices of those who came before them.

Annette Rodriguez 1:58:18

Absolutely. What do you think about preserving the legacy of the palm school?

Michael Ruiz 1:58:29

Oh man, that palm school is so important to me because of the things that we talked about. It's important to me, because the memories that I have of that school, the the some of the life changes that I have as a result of going to palm school, the lady that that paid, the librarian assistant that paid for my lost book. I mean, that changed me. You know, that had a lasting impact. Palm school had a lasting impact. And to me, I'm like, Okay, if I still dream about palm school at the age of 67, I know it had a huge impact on me. I think about all the things you know, I did there, I have great memories of palm school. It's not just the memories, but it is. It's the actual change in my life, which I think was a positive thing, that I can go out and and help folks financially. I can go out and and help kids get through high school and go to college, all of those things were that that was my giving back to the community, and palm school was a big part of that.

Annette Rodriguez 1:59:59

I. Would you like, as we're thinking about as the county is thinking about preserving or restoring palm school, what would be your dream for that space?

Michael Ruiz 2:00:09

My dream would be to go back inside that school and to preserve as much as one possibly could and and now being retired, I would be happy to help in any way that I could to preserve palm school. I really would, either financially or volunteering or boots on the ground, whatever, I mean. That's That's what palm school means to me that I go so far as to do all of those things to preserve it, you know. And I'm sure there's many others that feel the same way, but yeah, it's, it's a huge played a huge part of my life.

Annette Rodriguez 2:00:58

Well, when you think about preserving so we So, excuse me, you could tell them the color of the paint. You could tell them just about everything about the place, inside and out.

Michael Ruiz 2:01:14

Are you asking like at the time, what it looked like? Yeah, okay.

Annette Rodriguez 2:01:16

Do you help if they wanted to restore spaces?

Michael Ruiz 2:01:21

Yeah, I I can remember the wooden floors, the wooden floors creaking, the color of the floors, dark wood. I can recall some of the wall colors in some of the rooms, huge, high ceilings, which I'm guessing, they're still there. I don't know if I remember all the colors of all the rooms, but I'm guessing that the walls were pretty standard. Not dark color, but kind of a light on the, say, beige or something

color. I don't know if I have, I remember where things were which are probably still in in the same spot that that those things I do remember, yeah,

Annette Rodriguez 2:02:26

so you could help them out with that, for sure. I

Michael Ruiz 2:02:29

I think I could, yeah, yeah. I'd be happy to, I'd be happy just to go in at school, yeah? Or the building, yeah, palm school.

Annette Rodriguez 2:02:36

Did you have a nickname when you were in elementary school? Or were you always Mike?

Michael Ruiz 2:02:43

I was always Mike. Pretty much. There was a Salvation Army Youth Center on Holly street that I lived close to, that my dad worked at part time while he was on strike. And everybody there had a nickname. My brother tried to give me a nickname so I could fit in with everybody there. His his nickname was jamito. There was a guy named possum. There was Malet, there was beaver. These were all three brothers too. Toots, my uncle's name took another uncle. Joe was gogus, another guy was hamburger. So my brother wanted to give me the name flat head, because I had a flat top. So a lot of the guys there would rub right after I got my hair cut. They would just kind of rub my head because they like the way it felt. Yeah. So there was, that was my name. Mostly went by Mike. My brother tried to make it flat head. But I think most everybody call me Mike.

Annette Rodriguez 2:03:49

So flat head didn't stick?

Michael Ruiz 2:03:53

Didn't really stick. No

Annette Rodriguez 2:03:57

probably for the best,

Michael Ruiz 2:04:03

I believe. So I think I had flat top up until I started all through palm school days sixth grade. I think seventh grade is when I finally had, like a haircut regular. I know we would go to Valentin Perez barber shop there on near the corner of East first and Waller Street. It was like a half a block east of Waller street on East first. You had a little shop there, and we would go in and get our hair cuts, and my brother would get the regular, but I would get the flat top. I don't know why, but I got the flat top and he got the regular, and I think it was like 50 cents or something like that. I remember Valentine had a bumper sticker on the mirrors, which, that was another thing that that influenced me growing up. It said, "it's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice."

2:05:04

That's beautiful, yeah,

Michael Ruiz 2:05:05

and I, he had a lot of stickers, but that one stuck with me because I thought, hmm, yeah, that that makes sense to me, so I tried to live by that.

Annette Rodriguez 2:05:19

So your your mom didn't cut your hair, and she

Michael Ruiz 2:05:22

my mom cut my hair. She worked at the model laundry for she actually worked at economy furniture, and that's where she met my dad. And then she worked, my mom worked at model laundry until I started elementary school. No, she worked there after I started elementary school, she could now go work. And then she decided she wanted to get into cosmetology. So she she took the test, she prepared for it, read the book, did everything, took the Tex test, and then she started working for Dillard's as a cosmetologist at Hancock shopping center, and then after a few years, she opened up her own shop at Hancock shopping center. It was called Red River stylist, so I would go there to get my hair cuts. And once I left Austin and went to work for NASA, the Johnson Space Center in Houston, it was foreign to me to pay for a haircut. I was like, what I gotta pay for a haircut that was foreign to me. So sometimes I come on weekends, Mom, can you cut my hair? Sure. Mijo, she loved cutting my hair, but yeah, so that's what she did, and

Annette Rodriguez 2:06:50

getting it done right too, not just paying for it, but getting it done right.

Michael Ruiz 2:06:53

done right? That's correct. Yeah. So,

Annette Rodriguez 2:06:56

so then you, as you said, you were, you were at NASA, even before you started working for them, you were part of this Co Op. What did it feel like to leave Austin and start that part of your career?

Michael Ruiz 2:07:11

Oh, yeah, it was okay, because I knew I was coming back to Austin, so I didn't feel afraid or anything, and Houston wasn't that far away. So after I did that, probably about five times, I was comfortable with it, and finally, finally graduated and I moved to Houston, it was a little different at first, because I had no family there. All my family was here in Austin, so I had to make a lot of friends, start getting into things. And when I get into Society of Mexican American engineers and scientists and teaching kids about STEM and getting into STEM. So, yeah, that was so it was a little transition there for a while, but I finally got used to I remember one time thinking, wow, I've been here so long that now this feels like home. And that was kind of strange to think that, oh, this is home now. Austin is not home anymore. This is home. So I transitioned, okay, I believe,

Annette Rodriguez 2:08:29

yeah, that first time when you say I'm going home and you mean Houston Exactly, exactly. And so you worked for NASA for over 40 years, 41 years. What are your biggest victories?

Michael Ruiz 2:08:46

I would say my biggest victories, or my biggest accomplishments, was reaching out to students, encouraging them to go to college and to graduate high school first, and to go to college and get their degrees, that those, to me, are my biggest victories. And as far as things that I enjoyed at NASA my the coolest things I ever did was going to the space shuttle launch, like a day or two before launch, and going up all the way to the top and going inside of the space shuttle and changing out the batteries for our experiment, because the space shuttle launch had gotten delayed so much that we were afraid that our navigation system batteries might go out. So to be able to do that a day or two before launch was just like, oh. Man. That was so cool to actually be inside the Space Shuttle at the Kennedy Space Center and to watch shuttle launches and landings at the Kennedy Space Center. That was really, really cool. Just, it's an amazing it's an amazing piece of machinery. That was those are probably some of the highlights of my career. Watching a night time launch on top of the Vehicle Assembly Building, one of the biggest buildings in the world by volume. It was just so cool. I mean, you know how many people get a chance to do that? That was just really, really, such a unique experience working at NASA and and the people that worked there, man, they're just amazing.

Annette Rodriguez 2:10:56

And so it never got it never got boring. You never thought, Oh, I've seen this before.

Michael Ruiz 2:11:01

Oh, no, it was always something cool to work on. Yeah, that my NASA job was never boring. It was just really neat things to see and do. I got a chance to go to New Mexico and Arizona, and did some testing in let's see some GPS testing different areas. I remember going to the Meteor Crater in Arizona to do some testing we were preparing for, like the navigation system on a a Mars rover or a moon rover. So to kind of work on stuff like that was just amazing.

Annette Rodriguez 2:11:55

Could you have imagined that with your with your encyclopedias in fourth grade?

Michael Ruiz 2:12:02

oh man. I mean, I remember 1969 when the you know, they were gonna land on the moon. I was outside playing my mom, my mom calling me, and says, Mike, come inside. They're gonna land on the moon. And I remember running inside and the black and white TV and just sitting there looking and thinking, Man, that is so cool. How cool it would be to work there. And little did I know at the time, you know that that would happen. And you know, I thank my uncle buddy for for showing me that opportunity, and for, you know, my teachers along the way and encouragement from family members. But yeah, that was, that was an amazing career. I mean, it really, really was,

Annette Rodriguez 2:12:57

and it's such a legacy from from where you came there at the Palm school first grade through sixth grade. Yeah,

Michael Ruiz 2:13:03

I was just, you know, I've got some friends that lived on Holly street that would tell me, Mike, I never would have believed that you would be working for NASA. I didn't either. So, yeah, it's a, it's a, it was a great experience, and that's why I wanted to share it with the other students, because I wanted them to have an opportunity to be able to to to experience that as well. You know, I know they lot of kids. We used to give scholarships for students that were high school going to college, but we, the Society of Mexican American engineers, decided, You know what, some of those kids don't reach high school, we need to catch them when they're in junior high. We need to catch them when they're in elementary and so that's when I did a lot of outreach to go to the elementary schools and encourage those kids. And they loved it. They loved space. Who doesn't love space? The kids loved it. And so I'll go to junior high schools and do the same thing, because we found out that a lot of them weren't making it to, you know, to high school. They weren't graduating. So it was a little too late then. So okay, let's concentrate on their younger students.

Annette Rodriguez 2:14:24

And you've done projects that also include the International Space Station. Correct? Can you tell us about those?

Michael Ruiz 2:14:32

Let's see the International Space Station. We had a an experiment on board. It was a navigation experiment. And it was the navigation camera that was going to be used on the Orion spacecraft for capturing imagery of the Moon and the Earth and the stars. And then that that imagery was really cool software i. Uh, it would capture pictures and of the moon or the earth and stars and the the the software would able, was able to tell the where you were in space, just based on that imagery alone, as well as your attitude in space, you know, not only where you were, but your attitude in space, which was really, really cool. And so I worked with the cameras in our lab, doing testing to see how they were performing, and, you know, verifying that they were meeting their specifications. And I remember, right after I retired, my supervisor sent me a picture. He goes, check out this picture, and I looked at it on my phone. Wow, that's cool. He goes, this is a picture from the cameras that you were working on when you were working on the Orion project. And I'm like, wow, that was so cool. I'm so glad that my supervisor, Tim sent me that that that photo of, you know, represented the work that we did in getting that Orion camera up on board. And, yeah, that experiment was on. We had some experiments on where the astronauts would mount the camera in the cupola of the space station, where they could look out and see the stars. They could see the Earth. So they would mount the camera there, and they would, based on the software that we had for them, they would capture the imagery for us. And so the imagery would come down, and we would process that see how well the camera performed. So that was really, that was fun. That was cool.

Annette Rodriguez 2:16:47

That's incredible. Did you ever talk to any of the the astronauts about the machinery and the engineering that you were doing? Did they ask you questions?

Michael Ruiz 2:17:00

Yes, actually, one time, our experiment was going to be going on board the International Space Station, and I remember my wife and I were at one of our rental houses, and I was working on a ceiling fan, and I got a phone call, and I looked at it and asked that we got on the phone, and yeah, the one of the astronauts has a question about your experiment that's coming up. Okay, so I got on the phone and kind of explained to him, you know, what to expect, and where the files were, and he just had some general questions. Wanted to make sure that he was prepared for our experiment. So that was kind of cool to be able to to be able to do that. You know, we spoke, we interacted with them during training sessions on how to run the software for our experiments. So yeah, that was that was fun. And then, of course, our dear friend Jose Hernandez, who, who had his recent movie come out, he was a great, a good friend of our he was a part of the society of Mexican American engineers and scientists. So, yeah, he, he, he actually, before he he went up into space, before he started doing his training, my wife and I hosted them at the house to have a little going away party. And so he came to the house, and we had a some friends come by to to wish him good will. And I remember he was asking about when he came, he was asking about making some salsa. And he asked my wife, Diana, Diana, do you have a molcajete? She goes, Yeah, I've got a molcajete. So she brought out little bitty molcajete like this, and he looks at it, and he goes, that's not a molcajete. Well, he ended up making the salsa anyway, and it was good.

Annette Rodriguez 2:19:10

He was looking for one this side.

Michael Ruiz 2:19:11

He was looking for a big one, yeah.

Annette Rodriguez 2:19:14

Oh, that's amazing. That's wonderful. Well, let me know if there are things we haven't been able to cover yet. I feel like you know we, we've really seen this, this progress from you in first grade into retirement, which I can't believe you retired, because we need you. But first grade through retirement and this, this sense of education always being this, this thread throughout your life that has given your life a kind of purpose and a kind of meaning, and that you've you've remembered all the people who dedicated their time to you, and you've chosen to do the same. Yeah. So are there things in there that we've we've missed, that you want to share with us?

Michael Ruiz 2:20:09

Can I look at my notes? I'm surprised that I really never had to reference these throughout the entire interview, which tells me you did an awesome job pulling stuff out. So thank you for that. Did a great job.

Annette Rodriguez 2:20:32

So we started this journey at your grandma's house. Tell us more about that area by your grandma's house.

Michael Ruiz 2:20:41

Okay, there's a ...grandma lived on third and Waller, and it was very close to the train tracks right there on Fourth and Fifth Street, and Waller and I grew up with hearing trains clashing all the time, because there was just a lot of activity there. I thought that was normal, so we used to my brother and my cousin and I used to go to the train tracks area, because there was a lot of loading and unloading of cargo there, and in particular I remember distinctly, was for some reason they would unload these comic books, and there was these huge piles of comic books, and I guess in order to not allow people to resell them. They would cut off the front page of the comic book, so all you had was the comic book itself. But I remember it didn't matter to me, because they were free. So we would go there, my cousin Victor and I would go there looking for comic books on Spider Man, sad sack, beetle Bailey, all those comics that we really enjoyed getting so I could have something to look at as a kid, because we were, I think I was probably in about, I want to say, third grade, maybe still going to palm school. So having those the train tracks there, and it's, it's, it's interesting, because to this day, I can, for some reason, I don't know why, I recognize this low frequency rumbling of the trains. Sometimes I ask other people, can you hear that? They're like, hear what? And I said, it's, it's a low frequency rumbling of a train going by, and they can't hear it. But I guess, because I grew up with it, it was so close that that I can still even with a little bit of bad hearing high frequencies I could still hear, even to this day, the low frequency rumbling of trains going by. But yeah, it was, it was interesting, because once we moved, when I moved from Austin to the Houston area in friendswood, which is the town that I live in now, halfway between Houston and Galveston. It was so quiet there, and it took me a while to adjust that at how quiet was, because I grew up right by the train tracks. Trains making noise all the time, horns going off, banging of all the cars together. And then we moved to Holly Street, very, very busy street, busses going by. And then when I moved out of the Austin area to friendswood, I was like, It's too quiet. It's too quiet. Took me a while to adjust that, and then I didn't realize until I would come back and I hear all my familiar noises, yeah, even to this day, I hear trains. And I'm like, it's kind of almost soothing a little bit when I when I hear that noise, I guess because I was a kid, yeah, did?

Annette Rodriguez 2:24:18

Did, was there any, ever any danger with the train tracks? Was there? Did folks give you warnings? Did you ever get scared? Did you feel the vibration coming and you knew to step back?

Michael Ruiz 2:24:30

Never really got scared, because that was more of an area where the trains would come and then park, so they were basically always parked there. But, you know, it's interesting that you ask that question, because right now, I just remembered a dream that I had, maybe, I don't know, a year or so ago, but I still dream about being right there on fourth and fifth and Waller Street, with the trains coming by and doing exactly as you say, worrying about, here comes the train. I need to get across the tracks real quick. I would have never remembered that if you had not asked me that question. But yeah, I still have dreams about being on Fourth and Fifth Street. Trains coming by real slow, not real fast, but knowing that I had have to get across the track just to be on the safe side.

Annette Rodriguez 2:25:30

Wow, wow. And so, so you're taking these comic books that they don't want you all to resell, right? They're, they're, they're making a mark on them or moving the cover so they're not, they don't have

resale value. But you were an entrepreneur. You never sold any of those comic books? You never tried?

Michael Ruiz 2:25:47

I never tried selling any of the comic books because, I guess, because they didn't have the front pages of Spider Man, or they're on there, or the archies, or, you know, Beetle Bailey. I mean, the rest of the whole thing had everything else, but they, I never, never attempted to try to sell comic books.

Annette Rodriguez 2:26:10

Tell us about some of your other entrepreneurial adventures. I know we've got the bottles.

Michael Ruiz 2:26:18

Yeah, the bottles. When I lived on Holly street, there was a huge, maybe a couple of huge pecan trees next to our house on the corner of holly and comal. Our house was one house over from that corner, and every year we would get some really, really nice pecans from that tree. People would come by and pick them up, because I think they were kind of out in the right of way. And so I would collect a lot of pecans. My mom loved pecans. So I would, you know, crack them for her, and sometimes put them in her coffee when I made her coffee in the morning, and so I decided one day I had a whole bunch of pecans, and I was thinking, man, I've got all these pecans. Maybe, maybe I could sell pecans. So I went across the street to a little store called Hernandez grocery, and I bought some bags for Mr. Hernandez, real small bags, the smallest he had, and I would fill them up with pecans. And then I got a black marker, and I wrote 25 cents on the bag. And I decided to go around the neighborhood to try to sell my pecans make some money. So I did that, and I took a bunch of bags with me. And I remember walking up, I know, I went to several houses and sold a few. Some people didn't want to buy them. Others wanted, you know, asking questions. But I remember one house in particular. I had walked all the way to East First Street and Waller Street, and it was a two story house there at the I believe it was apartments like each door, it was a different apartment. And I remember knocking on one door in particular, and a lady comes to the door, and she's not fully dressed. She had just like a slip on, and that kind of startled me, because I was like, whoa, what do I do? I didn't know. I mean, it's kind of like staring at her face, not looking down or anything. And she goes, "yes?". And I'm like, I guess she just saw me, just like staring. And I'm like staring at her. And yes, I said, Uh "oh, do you want to buy some pecans?" She goes, "Well, are they any good?" I said, "yes, they're good". And so she looks at the bag. She goes, Can I try one. I said, Sure. So she grabs one, takes it back, I guess she cracked it or something. She came back with the quarter. And I was like, Oh, yeah. So she, she bought, she bought a bag from me. And it's interesting. I mean, I was really excited. I don't know if it's because she wasn't fully dressed, or or what, because that that's like, the only sale I remember from selling pecans. But I remember going home that day, uh, telling my dad, Hey, uh, I sold pecans today. "You did?" "Yeah". He goes, "where'd you sell him?" I said, "just walking around the neighborhood", and he's like, kind of looked at me. He kind of chuckled a little bit laughing. I'm thinking, Why is he laughing? And he goes, "were you wearing that hat when you went around selling them?" I said, "Yeah". He goes, "Did you read what it says on top? And I said, No. So he goes, Why don't you read it? So I took it all. Yeah, and it was a big blue cap and real big white letters". It said, "Be kind to Big Daddy". So I was like, Okay, so I'm thinking he goes. That's probably why you sold so many of your bags at Peacock, so that that was a learning experience. There.

Annette Rodriguez 2:30:20

Do you remember whose hat that was?

Michael Ruiz 2:30:23

I don't. I thought. I have no idea how it got in the house. All I remember is grabbing a hat. I didn't even bother to read it. I just put it on my head and went to sell my pecans.

Annette Rodriguez 2:30:39

That's a great story. I would love to see a picture of that hat someday. And then you you had some school pictures too, right? Oh, yeah,

Michael Ruiz 2:30:48

yes, I had forgotten about some school pictures that I had, that I found, and some old boxes that my mom and dad had, and looked on the back of the picture and it said 10 cents on it. And I'm like, why does it say 10 cents? And it was in a big black marker, and it was obvious a kid wrote it because it wasn't very straight lettering. And I asked my dad, I said, Why does this say 10 cents? He goes, You were trying to sell your pictures to family members when you were a kid. And I think that was like first or second grade, I can't recall, but I was trying to sell my my school pictures to family members for a dime.

Annette Rodriguez 2:31:41

That is great. I wish we could see the back of one of those pictures with your little writing, good, little cool. I wonder if you made any money.

Michael Ruiz 2:31:50

Oh, I don't remember.

Annette Rodriguez 2:31:54

So tell us about some other neighborhood places you might have hung out at. I know that it seems to be that the the palm school was part of this larger community, right? And so what are the other places that that you and the other kids, or you and your brother, you and your family, would hang out at?

Michael Ruiz 2:32:17

Yeah, there was a, I remember not too far from the house on Holly street, there was a 7/11 store that we would often go to get i sees or or soft drinks or snacks or something like that. And I remember walking in to that store and to the left there was, as you walked in just near the glass area, there was a section that was magazines and a real small section of toys. So I would always immediately go to the toy area. My dad never really bought anything there, but one time in particular we were there. I don't know what he was getting, but I was looking at a water wiggle. And man, that was the coolest thing at the time. You had to have a water wiggle. And so I remember my dad walking up, saying, What are you looking at? I said, Oh, I'm just looking at this water wiggle. And to my surprise, he goes, Do you want it? And I was like, yeah. So he said, Okay, let's get it. So I was like, Ah, man, that just made my whole day, month, week. Just couldn't believe it had a water wiggle. So i took it home and made sure that I hooked up the water hose to it and that it was in the front yard, so that everybody driving by could see my water

wiggle, and my second cousins across the street could see it. And then I was just so proud of that water wiggle I don't know what possessed my dad that particular day to say, Yes, let's go ahead and get it, but something happened, and he said, Yes, and that's a memory that will stick with me forever on water Wiggles.

Annette Rodriguez 2:34:16

And he stood out there, impressing the neighbors with it. Yes,

Michael Ruiz 2:34:21

I stood out there cranking it on and having that thing go all over the front yard, water in the grass at the same time, just playing with it. And, yeah, that was that was a neat day, for sure.

Annette Rodriguez 2:34:35

Did your dad get to see you enjoying it?

Michael Ruiz 2:34:38

Oh, yeah, my dad watched me for a while playing with it right there by the front door. And I think he I think he thought that was a good purchase. That was a good purchase for my son. Yeah.

Annette Rodriguez 2:34:56

What about other places you hung out? There was a there was a. A burger joint, but I but was this later, or was this during your this junior high, elementary years,

Michael Ruiz 2:35:07

The burger joint was there. There was a place on East first and Waller called King B, King burger. I think my Uncle David worked there for a while. In fact, he used to go to the Salvation Army Center a lot, and his nickname was hamburger. And I think because he worked there a while and ate the profits, I don't know, but this place, it was one of my favorite places to go to, the king B. It was so close to the house. When we lived on third and and, and Waller Street was only like a block and a half away. And then when I lived on Holly Street, we would walk to go get our hair cut on waller and first, East first street. So it was a it was a nice place to go to get hamburgers, which I loved, even to this day I love hamburgers. Actually, my wife doesn't like me to say this, but I would prefer a hamburger over a steak any day. That's how much I love hamburgers. So anyway, we would go to the king bee, and I'd get a hamburger and a french fry, and my brother and I would go there after we got our hair cut at Val and the pet is his barber shop. And I remember thinking one day, I don't know, maybe I was in junior high school thinking the prices of hamburger went up from 50 cents to 65 cents. That was unbelievable. I remember telling my brother, you know, kind of kidding around, man, one day, hamburger is going to become \$1 and we kind of just both left, like, yeah, \$1 that was, I mean, I was exaggerating at the time, and now I go buy a hamburger. It's between \$15 and \$23 it's just, it's unbelievable. But, yeah, that was a really nice place I used to go to. I remember they had for a while, they had a pinball machine underneath the covered area there, next to the hamburger joint. And one time, I don't know what happened to that machine, but it was given free games left and right. And I kept winning and winning and winning. I bet I was there for about two and a half hours, my mom had to come look for me

because, because I kept playing and playing and playing and playing and playing, I'll never forget that that was so fun to be winning all these free pinball games.

Annette Rodriguez 2:37:58

What else was in that? In King B, the king B, the king B was it? Was it booze? Was it a counter? No,

Michael Ruiz 2:38:07

No, it was just that you walk up to a little, small counter and you order your burgers right there. People could pull up on the gravel road there, on on the gravel on the side, and park their cars. And most people ate their burgers in their cars there. They did have a little small area on the side, on the east side of the small building. It was really small that where you could sit down on picnic tables. They had, like, maybe three or four picnic tables and eat your burgers there if you wanted to. Yeah, that was a that was really a neat

Annette Rodriguez 2:38:42

place. And you they and they were delicious.

Michael Ruiz 2:38:47

Oh, absolutely they had. That was the first place I ever ate a Frito Pie and a Frito salad. And to this day I make Frito salads. I just love the Fritos. They get a little Frito bag and they cut open the edge, and they'd open it up and it pour in tomatoes, lettuce. I didn't like onions, so I didn't have onions online, and kind of mix it all together and give it to you. Or Frito Pie, where they get some chili and pour it in the Frito bag. So you, when you got your when you got your serving it, it was a Frito bag with all the ingredients on the inside. Dad, I do remember it was so delicious.

Annette Rodriguez 2:39:36

I love Frito pie. I love Frito Pie. We eat that back home too. You also mentioned the Salvation Army building.

Michael Ruiz 2:39:45

Yeah, the Salvation Army Youth Center was a big positive thing for the community there. It kept. Kids in the neighborhood from getting involved in other stuff that they didn't need to be in. They had a lot of organized sports there. They had basketball, softball, baseball, flag football they had pool tables for the kids to play pool. They had like a teenager's table and then a little kitty table. And I loved going there because you got to see all your friends there. My dad worked there part time when he was on strike from the economy furniture. So I spent a lot of time there. Was like my second home, because he was there. And so I would my brother was there, and family members that lived across the street from the Salvation Army Youth Center were there, and a lot of my friends were there. And it was just a really, really good place to go. I remember hot wheels were popular at the time. They even had a hot wheel competition to see whose Hot Wheels could go the fastest. That was a lot of fun. All these competitions. Participating in in the baseball games. And, you know, you get a trophy at the end of the year if you won first place. So that was kind of, that was kind of cool. That was a really, a great, really great place to have all the kids go to. I really enjoyed that I still have dreams about the Salvation Army Youth Center. Just being in that area, every time I drive by on Holly Street, I'm looking over there. Think it's

Sanchez elementary school now, but I look over there and think about all the fun that we had at that place. Yeah.

Annette Rodriguez 2:42:07

and there was a Mr. Ramirez there?

Michael Ruiz 2:42:10

There was a Mr. Ramirez's kids went to the Salvation Army Youth Center. And I remember one year my dad and I went to Mr. Ramirez home, which was on the feeder road, the North Mountain feeder road of I 35 and I believe it's Taylor Street. And not sure why we went there. I don't know if he was going to, my dad was going to drop off something to Mr. Ramirez. And it was during Christmas time, and I know Mr. Ramirez had a Christmas tree up with a bunch of presents under the tree. And I remember thinking, wow, look at all those presents. While my dad was talking to Mr. Ramirez just, I'm just staring at those presents, looking and looking. And I guess Mr. Ramirez must have noticed that I was looking, so he asked me, you know, do you want one of those presents? And I'm like, oh, and I think he, since his kids were about my age, he could have grabbed any one of them, a boy's toy or something. And I said, Yes, and so he went and grabbed a present and gave it to me. And I was like, Wow. I couldn't believe it. You know, he was giving me one of the presents under the tree, and so my dad asks me, "What are you supposed to say?" And I said, "Can I have one for my brother?" My dad just kind of shook his head laugh this, "that's not what you're supposed to say". So anyway, I got one for me and my brother, and I said, Thank you, but yeah, and I'll never forget that, because he was so generous. He was really, really a generous person. And to this day, I love giving Christmas presents out. And you should see Archer at home right now, oh my goodness. It's full of presents. It's just, I mean, those are the kind of things that you don't think it's big deal at the time, but they have, like, a lasting impact on you, from people that show care, show love, show an interest, and it just it has a lasting impact. You know, that did on me. It didn't seem like a big deal at the time, but a life long impact. But it surely did, yeah,

Annette Rodriguez 2:44:53

and so what did your brother say when you went home and gave him a present?

Michael Ruiz 2:44:57

He was really excited. I. He was like, Where'd you get this from? I said, Mr. Ramirez just gave it to us. Really? Said, yeah, he was, he was, he was really excited. So now he had an extra present under the tree as well. That kind of reminds me of another little mom and pop store not too far from where we lived, on East Third Street and water. It was like one block over. We would walk from My Little House in the back, because the our little house was right on an alley. We would walk across Waller street to the next street, and Mr. Aleman own the little store there, and he would sell knick knacks candy. We would go there. I would go there for the candy. I mean, sometimes I'd even have any money. And I think he would just give me a candy anyway. Very, very, very nice man. I'll never forget him. He He's the one. In fact, he's the one that my parents bought our house from on Holly street. So that was kind of cool. He would come monthly to the house to collect the monthly payment on the house, which was \$50 a month, unbelievable. And one, I remember one year, he was so gracious that he, my brother and I were there, and he, he said it was Christmas time. And my dad, I think, had given him, like, some 10s and 5s

for the the monthly payment. And he just, I remember him saying, Merry Christmas, and he gave me a five, and he gave my brother a five. And I'm like, Man, can you I was like, just elated that he had given us money. And I'm thinking, I look back and I think, wow, you know that was 20% of of them of the payment. So that was really, really nice of him to do that. I'll never forget that either. This is a little things that you just kind of stick with you for the rest of your life. For me, it's it's really things that people did out of love and care, and those things have really stuck with me, and those things are the the things that I try to live my life by

Annette Rodriguez 2:47:41

those models of generosity, generosity,

Michael Ruiz 2:47:43

it had such a huge impact on me. And because people were generous to me, I felt like what I want to go back and and be generous to to other people as well, especially those that you know aren't as fortunate, and aren't as blessed,

Annette Rodriguez 2:48:05

and and what a a blessing it is for us that you can speak their names. And so those people are not forgotten. Their generosity is not forgotten. We all now know Mr. Aleman. We all now know him as as this kind man who gave 20% of the monthly payment.

Michael Ruiz 2:48:22

20% of the monthly payment, that's a big thing now to two young boys, yeah, two young boys that he probably never thought that it would have such a lasting impact, but it did.

Annette Rodriguez 2:48:38

It's beautiful. So there's one other thing I remember, and I think this is palm school years, which is the Aqua fest. Is that? Is that palm school years afterwards?

Michael Ruiz 2:48:49

The Aqua fest? I believe was probably, yeah, I think it was after palm school, because the Aqua fest, Austin Aqua festival, I was already living on Holly Street, and being so close to the Colorado River, they would have these boat races that went from, you know, they called it Town Lake, so they kind of had to stay between the dam and maybe I 35 maybe South Congress, but they would have these races there. And it was really, really loud for that weekend. I remember it always being really loud. And a lot of people would come, you know, come into the neighborhood, the streets would fill up with cars parked all over the place. It was, it was, it was interesting to see that, especially since East Austin was considered unsafe because it was, you know, predominantly Mexican Americans and African Americans. So it was very foreign to me to see a lot of white people coming into the neighborhood, like, where they come from? Oh, where'd they come from? But, yeah, that was a that was an interesting thing to see. The Fiesta gardens was there not too far away from us. They would have special events there in the evening. So at night you could hear music from the Fiesta gardens come all the way to our house. A lot of Tejano music you could hear. They would have parties, Quinceaneras, birthdays, celebrations, weddings. A lot of, I remember a lot of listening to a lot of music. Sometimes the sound

was was, or maybe the wind was blowing the sound, and you could really, really hear it really well. That was kind of cool. Yeah, so Fiesta, Fiesta gardens and aqua festival were, were things that I remember, I think I found a little Aqua festival coin the other day that had my dad's name. It said "Carrie and Jim" on it. It's one of those where you press the little buttons and it puts the the letters on there. That was kind of cool to see that.

Annette Rodriguez 2:51:29

That's That's adorable, right? They so I know that some folks in the neighborhood thought that the boat races were too loud, yeah, but you all enjoyed them.

Michael Ruiz 2:51:41

I thought that they were loud and little bit annoying, but it really didn't. It didn't bother me too much. Just, you know, I just put up with it for a Saturday and a Sunday. It wasn't like all week long or anything. I don't remember it being all week long. I think more bothersome might have been the traffic. That was probably a little more bothersome. But, I mean, I could put up with the sound or walk to my grandma's house on Holly street, or do the other one on Third Street, and I wouldn't be able to hear it there. So, but I remember people protesting about the boat races there. I do remember that for sure, yeah.

Annette Rodriguez 2:52:31

So as we kind of think about this, where we the journey you've taken us on through your neighborhood, through your life, through palm school. What would you want somebody who didn't know palm school, who didn't know your neighborhood? What would you want them to know about this place in this time?

Michael Ruiz 2:52:58

Wow, that's a challenging question, because there's so many things that I would want them to know about it. I guess the it's hard to say. I mean, I would want to say the impact that it had on me, but I don't know if I really would want them to know that. I mean, that's, that's cutting. I don't know if that being selfish, because I just want them to know, you know, the positive impact that palm school had on me, the positive impact that the Salvation Army had on me, that the positive impact of some of those things in the community had on me, I would want them to know that it at the time, it wasn't considered A good place to be. You know, because of they thought there was criminal element there. It wasn't that way at all. I mean, you know, I I guess, because I grew up there, I never felt afraid of walking through the neighborhood. I never felt afraid of walking at night to my grandma's house, which was like, three and a half blocks away. I didn't have that fear. It was a it was, I mean, I felt like it was a close community. I would want them to know that it wasn't that way sank. That would probably be the main thing, I guess.

Annette Rodriguez 2:54:38

And still in your dreams, I'm sorry, and still in your dreams.

Michael Ruiz 2:54:43

It's still in my dreams. I mean, palm school is still in my dreams, the Salvation Army youth center is still in my dreams, the trains on Third and Fourth Street. I mean, all of those things obviously had a huge impact on me, those still come back to me, and they're good dreams.

Annette Rodriguez 2:55:08

Well, thank you so much for sharing with us. We're so grateful to have you share your stories with us absolutely. Thank you so much, Mike, you're welcome. Thank you. Applause.