

Palm_School_Vasquez_Toña

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SPEAKERS

Paulina Serrano, Toña Vasquez

Paulina Serrano 00:00

Good afternoon. Today is Sunday, December 15, 2024 My name is Paulina Serrano. I am interviewing Tony a Vasquez in Austin, Texas for the Travis County oral history project. We are at the University of Texas at Austin campus. Thank you, Ms Vasquez for agreeing to this interview. The raw unedited recording in this interview will be archived at the Travis County archives, where it will be available to anyone who wishes to access it. As we said earlier, if there is anything you don't wish to talk about, we respect your wishes. Also, if there's something you want to discuss, please do make sure we discuss it. Please also let us know if you need to pause the interview. Today, we're going to talk about your life experiences, particularly as it relates to palm school. We'll also discuss your relationship to community education and political participation, and if you're ready. Ms Vasquez, let's begin. Can you please tell us your name and your relation to palm School.

Toña Vasquez 01:07

My name is Tona Vasquez, and I attended palm school for my second, third, fourth and fifth grade years, which started in 58 and ended in 63, 1963.

Paulina Serrano 01:27

and can you tell us a little bit about your childhood? What was that like?

Toña Vasquez 01:32

I was born in San Antonio in 51, my parents divorced, and my sister and I ended up moving with my mom and my new step father to Austin, and so it was a whole new beginning, and I was a little nervous. I remember sitting in the back of the car, and it was like, I'm not sure what time of the night it was, but it was really dark, and we were coming over down the highway on IH 35 and right where William cannon is, it's like a hill. And I remember going being there in that spot, and it was like the hill and looking out,

and everything around was dark, but the only bright thing that I could see in the front of us was the Capitol. Everything else was pitch black, and that still sticks to my memory.

Paulina Serrano 2:38

What was it like when you saw the Capitol?

Toña Vasquez 2:40

I thought it was really cool. I wasn't sure what it was. All I know is that I saw this building in front of me that was all lit up, and it looked really cool. Of course, I didn't learn about what it was till later on, but I that just caught my attention in the pitch blackness of the you know, as we were driving down I 35 and during that time, you know, coming into town, it was all Woods up there. There were there were no houses. There really weren't any street lights or anything, till you got closer into town. So the only bright thing that showed that, that we saw, or I saw, from behind the car seat was that lighted up building, not sure what it was, but it would look real pretty.

Paulina Serrano 03:27

And what year was that?

Toña Vasquez 03:30

It had to be 58, 57-58 because that's about the year that I entered second grade when I came in to Austin.

Paulina Serrano 03:39

And what year did your mom marry your stepfather?

Toña Vasquez 03:45

Good question. I don't know. All I know is that we were still in San Antonio, and my mom just came home one day and said we're moving, and introduced us to this person and said that that was, you know, my new My stepfather, or our step father, for my sister and myself, and that we were moving and but I didn't know where we were moving to. She just said we were moving and packed up the boxes that we had and got in the car and drove on. I didn't know where we were going on. We were going to trip.

Paulina Serrano 04:23

What was your mother's name,

Toña Vasquez 04:25

Janie Perez, and Married name was Alta Mirano.

Paulina Serrano 04:32

And your stepfather's name,

Toña Vasquez 04:34

Jose Alta Mirano.

Paulina Serrano 04:38

And what was his occupation? And your mother?

Toña Vasquez 04:41

He was a self employed house painter. And my mom waitressed here and there sometimes, but that's usually what did in San Antonio, yes, yeah. And even when we moved to Austin, she worked in some of the cafes on sixth street. She worked in the cafe off and on, not all the time.

Paulina Serrano 05:09

Do you have any memory of going to school in San Antonio?

Toña Vasquez 05:13

Yes, actually, I went to Bowie elementary for the first grade, and I remember it being and I actually visited, not in the school, but I passed by the school, and it was still there, and the fire escape was still there, because I remember we used to during the lunch period, we would run up the the the ladders, and comes, use it as a slide. We used to do that all the time, because during lunch, at that time, once you finished eating, you could you they would let us go outside and play until it was time to come back inside. And so that's what we always did. And it was so funny that, you know, later on, you couldn't do that anymore. It had to be supervised, or you had to stay at your table and you couldn't go anywhere. But back then, in San Antonio, I remember the minute we finished eating, and a lot of times I would finish eating quickly because we couldn't afford much back then, and so my mom would make us bean bean tacos, right? And that's what I would take for lunch. And she always gave us a nickel because we could buy milk and and I didn't really like to eat my tacos, because there were kids that are were around me, and they were able to buy their trays or get a tray, right? And I could never get a tray. I always had to take tacos. And so back then, I wanted to hurry up and go play. I didn't want to eat that bean taco. I would throw it away. I would throw it away, drink my milk and just go run play outside all the time. Every once in a while I'd be really starving, and I would eat it, but a lot of times I would just throw it away and go play outside. Because we could do that, you know,

Paulina Serrano 07:17

in San Antonio, at school at Bowie, were were you among more Mexican American kids?

Toña Vasquez 07:29

Yeah, yeah. I don't remember seeing a lot of white kids around there. And so, yeah, so we were always playing, but everybody looked like me just about so and

Paulina Serrano 07:41

those, those kids who were or you, you would hurry up and eat your lunch because kids would make would make fun of you, or was it other adults?

Toña Vasquez 07:52

It was the kids wouldn't make fun of me. They really didn't care. They were just doing their own thing too, and everybody was just always excited to hurry up and finish eating because we could go play

outside. And I don't even remember if we had teacher supervision or anything. All I know is that, you know, they told you they sat they sat you down, said to eat, and when y'all were ready, you could go play outside. And so a lot of us, I never felt anybody was making fun of me. There were other kids that did bring a lunch, but I don't know if it was half and half or whatever, but, but I never, I never remember anybody making fun of me. Yeah, I only remember that I was kind of self conscious of it a little bit, but I got tired of eating them, and I ended up hating to bring my taco in a brown bag, right? And I just hated it. Sometimes I'd go straight to the trash can, just throw it away, get my milk, and then go outside, and that was it. I don't know how I made it through the rest of the day, you know, starving, or whatever. I don't remember that. All I remember is lunch, throwing it away and going going outside to play.

Paulina Serrano 09:09

And that must have been first grade. Then, yes, it was first grade. Yeah, did you speak what? What was taught at where you were? Did you speak English at school or or Spanish.

Toña Vasquez 09:21

I spoke English. I spoke English. It may have been broken English, because my mom spoke primarily Spanish, and her English was broken. So I know that when we moved into Austin, and you know, back then, you know, we had little spellers, little spelling books, little brown spelling books and stuff. And my mom would sit down at the table all the time with me, and I would be practicing my spelling and my writing, and she would be sitting right next to me, spelling and writing. And my mom wasn't a reader back then. She couldn't read, I guess. But I never saw her reading. She watched TV. But what she mainly did was she visited with the neighbors a lot. She liked to talk a lot, share stories, you know. And I guess a lot of the women thought she was a gossip, so maybe she was, I don't know, but she did like to talk. She could hold a whole conversation by herself.

Paulina Serrano 10:28

So in English?

Toña Vasquez 10:31

No all in Spanish. All in Spanish, and occasionally you would hear the English, but it was mainly in Spanish that she was talking, you know, but, but I know she took a big interest in me going to school and always reminding me, you sit there, you don't talk, you don't move, you don't do anything unless your teacher tells you it's okay to do it. Otherwise, you sit there and you do your work and keep your mouth shut. And she would tell me that every single morning, every morning, and so that's what I did. But I tried to do but I couldn't, because I was a talker myself. I had a lot of energy. I was like a I describe myself as a tom boy, and even my kids, you know, when I had kids, I would tell them that, and my grandchildren, yes, I was a tomboy. And "No, Grandma, you weren't". I go, "Yeah, I was. I was" my best friend, and I used to roll tires down the middle of the street for each other, and we try to jump through them, right? And so, I mean, yeah, we played jacks in the middle of the street, kickball, everything that I learned how to play marble. So we played marbles all the time. And so, yeah, we, I was pretty energetic back then.

Paulina Serrano 11:48

So, and those, those workbooks then that you would do with your mom, those were also in Spanish?

Toña Vasquez 11:55

No actually, those were in English. I had to, it didn't dawn on me, you know when you're it didn't dawn on me until way later that you know when you're a kid, you don't think about things like that. You just do. You just do what you're told. And like my mother told me, you do what they tell you. And and I didn't write very well. I had teachers tell me that my handwriting was like chicken scratch, and there were times, a lot of times, that I couldn't go to PE because I had to practice my writing during PE time, and I'd be stuck in the room. And a lot of times it was just by myself. I'd be left in the room to practice my writing in the handwriting book. And up until the fifth grade, I still had my teacher telling me that that looks like chicken scratch. And you know, so there were quite a few times that I was by myself in the classroom, having to practice my writing. And throughout those those years, too, I couldn't pronounce my "ch's". So by the time I got to fourth grade, I was very conscious of my speech and that I couldn't say some words. And so when it came around to spelling, I had my my teacher, Miss, Miss Reyes. At that time, she was really nice, but she was determined that I was going to learn how to say my "ch's" is so during spelling, and I don't think it happened every day, but during during the week, she would pull my desk out, and I have to sit there with my book and pronounce all these words that were "ch" is, all by myself. I had to sit there and say every one of them. And then, you know, in time, she would have us reading aloud, and she would be able to tell whether you know I was pronouncing them. So that stuck with me to this day. I'm very conscious, and I try to articulate. And if you notice my grandson, he tries to articulate everything too, and he gets it for me, my kids, do they get it for me? Because, I mean, it was pounded into me. You have to say it correctly, or else, you know, you get reprimanded, or you get stuck in the hall again by yourself, you know, having to say all those "ch" words and so that stuck with me to this day. There's, there's a lot of little things that have stuck with me to this day. And it wasn't like I said, it wasn't until not here I am, 70 years old, 73 and. I think it was around my 30s 40s that I realized I had to assimilate. I didn't know what that meant growing up, really as a kid, but in all these systems that were not really built for a background like mine. They weren't built for me. So it was like they weren't, they weren't sensitive to the culture, you know, they just disregarded and said, No, you got to let all that go, and you got to go this way and do this. And so it took me a long time to realize that that, uh, that's the way it had to be. And growing up as a kid, you know, I guess in my own ornery way, I was, you know, always laughing and playing and, you know, getting up from my chair, so I was continuously reprimanded. I had to stand in the corner if I kept talking. In third grade, I had my teacher come by the desk, and if I wasn't quiet, they'd hit you with a ruler on your hand. And we were out playing in the in the playground, we'd be playing, you know, kickball, not running everywhere. And if a Spanish word slipped out of our mouths, mine or whoever else is, the other kids would tell on us. So the minute we got back into the classroom, the teacher listened to the kids, and so I'd end up in the corner again, or I'd be told to go to the principal's office, and I'd go sit in there until it was time to get back to the class. I don't know how long I would sit there, but, you know, I had quite a few visits to the principal's office and quite, quite a few times to either stand or sit in a corner for a while. I don't know for how long so, but those things happened.

Paulina Serrano 17:07

And were you? Were you the only do you have any siblings?

Toña Vasquez 17:11

Yes, my, my, my little sister at that time, did she also go to palm? She went to palm? Yeah. And so that's why I didn't stay after school, because I had to, I had to take her home. So I didn't stay for anything after school, if they had after school. So like my other friends that were here, and they were talking about the things they did after school, I didn't do those kind of things. If I did anything, it had to be during the school day, because I had to take my sister home.

Paulina Serrano 17:43

And what's your sister's name?

Toña Vasquez 17:46

Florinda, she's passed now, but yeah, so she, I had to take care of her,

Paulina Serrano 17:51

and she was, how, how much younger than she was,

Toña Vasquez 17:55

three years younger than than myself.

Paulina Serrano 18:01

And so what do you think so, when you come to Austin and you did your you did your mom take or take you to get registered at Palm? Did you have to do the registration? Or how do you do you remember your first, your first encounter with the school?

Toña Vasquez 18:25

Yeah, actually, I don't, but I'm pretty sure that my mom took me. But my mom never really went to the school. She never went to any of my programs. I don't even remember her going to any conferences or anything like that. I always went, and she always told me to bring the papers and which I did, and she'd sign them and send them back, but she never really went to go see me, and I was in choir and programs and stuff like that. I still did things on my own, but I did it because my friends were doing it. So I got support from them, right? And and I wanted to belong, so I did what they did, right? And so regardless whether my mom was there or not, and I really didn't have any relatives here in Austin, I mean, it was just my mom and my sister and my stepfather, that was it. I didn't have anybody else, but I made friends pretty quickly and and I enjoyed going to school, regardless of the fact that, you know, all these other things were going on. I had my fair share of paddlings too, and not because I was cussing or anything, but because of the fact that I wouldn't be quiet. I talked too much, and so I ended up going some of the teachers, just like Miss Jordan in third grade, would send me to the office all the time. Fourth grade, no and fifth grade, but it was my younger years, especially third grade, that I remember going to the office quite often. Miss Reyes is what she ended up doing my fourth grade teacher. She's the one that would sit me outside to say all the "ch" words. But the other thing that she did for me, too was. I was a runner, I used to run, you know, to school, and back then we got to come home for lunch, so which was cool, because then I'd run all the way home, and it wasn't very far. I'd run all the way home, and my mom always had something for me to eat, and then I'd run all the way back to school. In the mornings, I would run all the way to school too, but I would get to school and you have to picture Miss Reyes. She says she was at least she looked tall to me. She was tall. Always kept her hair nicely

combed, used those pencil skirts. She looked she was really nice, looking pretty and high heels and prim and proper, right? I would get to school in the morning, and my hair was all over the place, you know? I was just a mess from running to school. So she ended up buying a brush and keeping it in her desk. So every morning, when I dashed in there, she would give it to me and say, "Go comb your hair" before I could even sit down at my desk. And this was just about every morning, so she kept the brush in her desk for me so I could be presentable or and I didn't think anything of it. I said, Oh, cool. I have a brush, you know, but, but when I think about that, I'm going, okay, you know, all these little things that, that I guess should have opened up my eyes, but because I'm a kid, I don't, I don't internalize things like that. I remember them, but you know, I don't, I don't know why they happened. Other than that, then it probably meant that I wasn't following the rules like I was supposed to, right? And I didn't look like I was supposed to when I was in school. And like I said, all these things, I didn't I it didn't come to me until way later, after I had my kids and after working the school district and stuff like that, it dawned on me, I'm going, what the heck?

Paulina Serrano 22:32

And what would you wear to school?

Toña Vasquez 22:34

Oh, my mom. My mom loved Shirley Temple. You got every that was a thing back in the 50s, right? And my mom loved Shirley Temple, and believe it or not, I used to have long hair. And my mom, again, we didn't have a lot of money, so I don't know if you've ever heard of this, but she would open the cans, tin cans, and she would roll the lids right, and she would put them on the fire to heat up. And that's how I got my hair curled with her, using those things. How, I don't know if she had pliers or something, but roll my hair around like that and leave it like that. And then I'd have these ringlets and and then my clothes. My mom used to starch all our clothes, because, you know, do we had a few nice clothes, but to make them last, she would starch them. And the minute we got home from school, we had to hang it up. It could literally hang up itself, but, but, but, yeah, we had to take our clothes off right after school, hang them up and and then wear it at least two or three times a week. And so she did that. And then, you know, we had these. And I was talking to the other ladies earlier about the kind of shoes we wore, those little those black and white Oxfords. And I loved my shoes. I love those shoes and bobby socks. And so my mom always made sure that they were folded over right. But then I was like, in fourth and fifth grade already, and when I got to school, all the other girls were picking up their bobby socks. And so I started doing that. Anyway, I got home one day and I forgot to put them back down, and my mom got really mad, and she goes, she's telling me in Spanish to keep them down, because if I have them up, then people are going to be thinking that I'm a Pachuca. Well, I didn't know what that meant, you know, but that's what she then. So I figured, okay, that's a bad thing. And so, so I, you know, I in the morning, I put on my sock and everything, pull them down, everything, but the minute I got to school, I pull them back up, and just like all the other girls did, you know, but it was funny, I love my shoes. And then the penny loafers. We had penny loafers. So those were the two most popular shoes that that I had during that time, and I had a pair of each. And I thought it was really cool. You could take a penny and put in your penny loafers, right, and with your bobby socks, and there you go, ready for school.

Paulina Serrano 25:42

And was, was your mom? What did, how did she feel about you going to school?

Toña Vasquez 25:46

Oh, she wanted me to go to school. She emphasized it all the time. You know, you go in there, you learn what you can. But what I ended up noticing as I moved to each grade was that she always sat down and did homework with me, and she would always practice her name, always she always watched me as I wrote and did my numbers and all of that. She didn't try to help me figure out math or anything like that. She just watched me, and she would write the numbers. So I should have brought my pieces of paper of her when she was writing her numbers. I'd be writing my numbers. She'd be writing her numbers. I would be writing my name. She would be writing a name, and she always practiced her name. I've got pieces of napkins, wherever we were in a restaurant at the house, whatever she would take a piece of paper and just practice writing her name all the time. It's like it was the most important thing that she owned, and she wanted to make it perfect. And I think about that all the time. And so, yeah, school was important. She always emphasized it, and I just tried to do the best I could. She ended up teaching herself how to read in English, and she did it, I guess from watching me and listening to me read and stuff like that, and looking through my papers, but she got to the point where she was able to read the newspaper. She loved reading the newspaper, and she would read it from front to back, ads and everything. And then the next thing that she would do is go around the neighborhood and tell everybody what she was learning from the newspaper, you know. And you know, of course, nobody wants your mom at her house like at five or six o'clock in the morning, which she would do with some of the neighbors drinking coffee and, you know. And sadly, in my head, I was thinking, I'm never gonna do that. I'm never going to be bothering people talking so much and, you know, just butting my into their business or sharing all this stuff and everything, but lo and behold, that's what I ended up doing, you know, and later in life, in my work and stuff like that. But she taught me a lot, you just by, you know, all the work that she did for herself to improve herself and and she loved the fact that my husband, at the time, and myself, we had a paper route, so she got a free newspaper every day. And back then, you had a Newspaper. Newspaper was delivered in the morning, and it was delivered mid day, mid noon and evening, four times a day. And we had paper routes, and we did it for extra income back then, so And back then, you mean when you were older, when I was older and married and had kids and stuff like that to make extra income. But a lot of our friends through newspaper, you know, had a newspaper route, believe it or not, and so, but yeah, so that's the way the neighborhood was. You know, we each kind of had similar jobs, you know, if it wasn't construction, it was meat cutters. You worked in a meat plant. And we used to have the Austin meat company right there on on Fifth Street, and then we had meat purveyors, and so, yeah, so there were a lot of meat market jobs back then. But again, like I said, my step father was a house painter, and so there was a lot of work then in being a house painter. And so my mom didn't work when I was when I was in elementary school. She stopped waitressing. Yeah, she didn't start waitressing till later on, when I got into junior high.

Paulina Serrano 30:00

And so when you all went to school, she stayed at home?

Toña Vasquez 30:02

uh huh, yeah, and visited with neighbors and stuff like that. But, and I don't know what else she did, but she did. She was not working during that time, only my stepfather

Paulina Serrano 30:15

and so what was in terms of education? What was her expectation of you and your and your sister?

Toña Vasquez 30:21

she just wanted me to do the best I can. It could and learn as much as I could. She only got to be, you know, I never really got to know my mom's background. I only know that she got as far as sixth grade, and then she ran away from home. She didn't want to be at home, and so, so she limited herself as to, you know, how she spoke, and the kinds of jobs she could have and things like that. So, so, yeah, so when I went to school, she always, she always emphasized go to school. She always sent me to school every single day. No excuses. Learn everything that I could. But you know, in thinking about that, I think she probably did it so that way I could teach her and model for her. And I guess I can say that she actually learned because, I mean, she got to the point where she could write better, spoke better in English, she could read the whole newspaper and understand it, to the point where it became so important for her to know what was going on in the city that she registered to vote and voted each and every time. And I just watched her, and I learned from her. She used to, you know, back then there was a poll tax, and they used to come around the house knocking, and my mom had a baby food jar. And, you know, you drop money around the house sometimes, or on the couch or whatever, whatever coin she found, she would put in that baby food jar, and she would save it, and it was only use it to pay for her poll tax. And I remember, I wish I had saved the jar, you know, but she did, and she didn't have to say much to me about how important it was to vote or anything like that, just watching her saving that money and how important it was for her to get that little card so she could vote. And she did it each and every time. How much money it was, I think it was \$1.64 back then, it may have been a little bit cheaper, a little bit higher, but I remember \$1.64 but most of her coins were all pennies and nickels that were in that jar. So, and I remember her counting it out, and the poll taker would count it out too with her. And they were always patient, you know, she would put it on the table, and they'd help her count it out and stuff and and then she'd be all proud and get her paper and put it in her purse, you know, and she was done,

Paulina Serrano 33:11

did most people in the neighborhood vote?

Toña Vasquez 33:16

From what I can see, it looked like it, because I could see them going from house to house in our neighborhood, you know, and it seemed like they stayed there longer than, like, five minutes, right? So I'm assuming that several people that lived in the block, you know, did vote, yeah, so. But I know my mom always did, yeah, and she always had her money ready in that little jar. I remember that, and I tell my kids that too. So, so there were things like that growing up that I got to see and stayed with me and and I didn't really during my years at school, I didn't really have any anything that I really saw in the neighborhood, because I lived on East Avenue. East Avenue is right by I 35 so we really didn't have neighbors other than the ones that live behind us, but when we lived at in the apartments behind Roy's taxis, you couldn't get to the houses in the back. But later on, during that, during my time in Palm school, we moved 1, 2, 3, 4 times. And, you know, I was only there four years, but we moved four times, and it was during those four times that, you know where the Holiday Inn is right now, across the river?

There's a billboard there, and it's a big billboard. Now I remember when they put it there, but anyway, there was a brown stucco house there. So when we moved from the apartments for Roy's taxi was we moved into that house. That was the first house that we moved into and even then, I mean, we lived there, and I still ran to school every single day, but along the way, there were houses there, and I had two best friends. One of them was Evelyn, who, as soon as I ran in that direction towards school, I stopped by, and we'd run to school together. The other person lived on Rainey street behind where Evelyn's house was, and her name was Linda Zapata, and we'd pick her up too on occasion, or else, Evelyn would run behind the house and she'd yell at Linda and say, "we're on our way to school, Linda, we'll meet you up there". And so, you know, we we'd meet each other at school, and we were good, good friends for a long time, but we ran to school and ran back all the time. But I really didn't have a lot of other friends that I would go home with until I got probably to fifth grade, and then I met some people that lived on the other side, like Margo and Mary Lou, they lived on the other side and and I was older then, so my mom said, Okay, you can, you can go to their house after school. And then there was, we had to cross the bridge right there, where palm school is, and you cross the bridge, there used to be a, I don't remember if somebody say it wasn't a Burger King, but it was a burger place, but it was really a shack. It wasn't a restaurant or anything like that. So you could go up to the window and order a hamburger and stuff, but it had like a little lean to on the side, and there was a juke box in there. So we always saved our money, or we pooled our money together, me and and esta Margo and Mary Lou, pool our money. We order our hamburger and share that, and then put nickles in the juke box and play our favorite songs back then, which were, God, I can't even remember the songs right now, but we had a bunch of songs that we liked during that time. I'll find that I'll remember in a little bit. But then we would cross the bridge, go eat there, and then go to Margo's house, and her house was right outside on the on the access road where I 35 is. So we'd go drop Margo off, and then we'd go left from there and go more into Garden Street. And that's where Mary Lou lived. And by that time, we had moved and lived down on Holly street. So, so, yeah, so we get, I have memories of that.

Paulina Serrano 38:16

Do you remember, what were you at Palm when you did the juke box,

Toña Vasquez 38:22

Uh huh yeah, we were still at Palm we were fifth graders, yeah, and so that was a lot of fun. I remember those times we used to do that.

Paulina Serrano 38:29

And what other memories of your So you moved four times is that because of, of, just out of necessity?

Toña Vasquez 38:39

I'm guessing, yeah, I'm guessing we did stay at least, no, I had to be at least a year at one of the two houses. Remember the billboard that I said there was a stucco house there, right? That we lived there for a long time, I'm guessing a year, and then a block down was another house that we ended up moving into. So I guess we spent the length of two years right there. And during that time, there were a lot of people that used to go fishing on the river in the Colorado River. So you always used to see people lined up with their poles, you know, fishing. And my stepfather liked fish, seafood, and that's why I like it too. Because every Sunday we ate, we ate fish or whatever, but he bought me a pole, and

on the weekends, we'd walk down to the river and sit there and fish. So that way we'd have fish for the weekend. That's where I learned to swim. He tied me up with a rope and threw me in a river, and it was still toward the edge, but you. Know, that's how I learned how to swim, somewhat, not perfectly, but you know, at least I could stay afloat.

Paulina Serrano 40:08

Did you have a good relationship with him?

Toña Vasquez 40:10

Yes, with my stepfather, yeah, during the first couple of years, yeah, until I got older and things just started getting rough for us and with my mom. My mom was a little eccentric, you know, and I think it became more so as she we got she got older, and then work started to become difficult to come by for a house painter, right? And so that's why, you know, as I got older, it got tougher to stay in one place for a very long time. But even then, I mean, we still, I mean, I still had my friends every time, you know, because we live close enough, we still went to the same school and stuff, and things hadn't really changed very much in the neighborhood, you could still walk around and not worry about anybody coming up on you and beating you up or anything like that. You could you could be walking at night and it was okay. And I don't remember us ever having to lock our doors at night. Never. You left the door open, the windows open, we could leave and go to the store and come back, and everything would still be fine. Didn't have to worry about things like that. Back then, growing up, I remember that it was really kind of carefree, you know. So it was a good thing. I think growing up like that, but later on, things started getting more difficult, and so, you know, down the line, I ended up having my we even lived in the projects, and the projects were dumpy places back then.

Paulina Serrano 42:07

Where were they?

Toña Vasquez 42:09

On Corta Street and off of East second? I mean, sewage was coming out of the pipes. You couldn't play on the playground equipment because it was they were either broken there, the ground was littered with glass, and so it was like trash was everywhere too. But if you needed a place to to be, and if you qualified, you could live in one of the places in there. So I had a lot of friends too that that moved by that time, I wasn't at Palm anymore, right? I was going to UJH, and, and so yeah,

Paulina Serrano 42:56

And so tell me a little bit about yours and your friends, outings in the neighborhood. What was the neighborhood like?

Toña Vasquez 43:04

Oh, it was fun. We could go to anybody's house that we thought we knew and go knock on their doors. And we actually among us ourselves. We had a lot of friends that whose houses we could go to. I didn't really, I didn't have a bike, but my friends did, and I would just run along with them. But we played a lot of games outside. We were always outside. We played marbles, we played jacks, jump rope. We're jumping rope all the time, all the time. I remember back when I lived, when we lived in apartments

behind Roy's taxi, my mom always played jacks with us, and so after school, we had a neighbor the apartments were that we lived in, it was like there was a main hall and there was a kitchen. We had our own kitchen, and then the bedrooms right and on this side of the hall, they had a kitchen and they had bedrooms, but we shared the same bathroom, and you had to walk to the end of the hall to share that bathroom. But what was really cool is that we were really good friends with our neighbor. Her name was Blanche, and so after school, I looked forward to it, because my mom would feed us, or Blanche would have something to eat, and then we'd sit out in the hall and play jacks all afternoon, and my mom and Blanche liked to play jacks with us, and so we would play jacks. And the girls at school like to play jacks too. So we would just have a good time playing jacks, jumping rope and just running the street. You know, we could go anywhere, and didn't really have to worry about anybody you know hurting us or us being scared. I don't ever remember being scared walking around or anything like that.

Paulina Serrano 45:10

And when you mentioned things changed a little bit. What? When? When did that change happen?

Toña Vasquez 45:18

Changes started happening when I guess There ended up being more traffic. And I just felt like the changes started happening, like after, well for me, the big wake up was when Kennedy was shot in 63 and we were in fifth grade, and I remember being at school, and then it was lunch time, and so me and a couple of other girls, We, you know, said behind ran home for lunch. While I was at home, my mom had the TV on, and then we heard the news, and I'm going, Oh no, and I started crying, because prior to that day, the school was already prepping us to give us a day off. They were going to let us go early to go downtown, because they were already decorating Congress Street, you know, waiting for him to come to Austin. And we were all excited. And, you know, I was going to meet up with some friends, and we were going to walk over there right. And then I go home, and we hear the news, and my mom was crying. I started crying, and I don't even remember if I ate, but anyway, I ran all the way back to school, and the cafeteria used to be the entrance to the cafeteria was on the side of the building. You know, here's here's the palm school entrance, but that our cafeteria was off on the side, and the doors were always open. I ran in there, and they always had the TV on, the state on the stage on for us. And so the TV was on and it was already showing the news. And I went in there, people were crying out loud, and I don't know who said it. It could have been me, but, you know, "does everybody know that this has happened?" And I took it upon myself with two other people, and we we didn't even say anything to the teacher. We just took off running through the school and went upstairs and started knocking on the doors and say, "Did you hear the news? Did you hear the news?" And that's all we did. We went through the whole school screaming and crying, and the teachers were crying all over the place. It was really sad. And it's like, to me, it just felt like everything was different after that, the sense of being safe and stuff like that, it just, it just seemed really strange, you know, and watching the funeral and things like that, and it was like it was unbelievable for a lot of us to even think that anything like that could happen, you know, and it wasn't far away either. So I know my mom was really upset my father, my step father, just, he just took it as another day, because he was just busy working, right? But yeah, the sense of things just were really sad. Even at school after that, people didn't say much, talk much. I don't know it was just different. And then what ended up being different for me too, I guess for me during that time, I did have my friends and did all these things, but then there was a period of my life that things started going a little bit bad with our family. During that summer after fifth grade, I injured myself. I fell

out of a tree. Like I said, before I was I was a tom boy, right? And I had climbed the tree. My mom, at that time, was working as a waitress my and it was a Saturday, and my step father was off working painting houses, and they left me in charge, at home with my sister and my little brother. Had a little brother then, but I decided, once my mom and my stepfather left, I said, this is my chance to climb the tree, and I had already nailed some boards on the tree to climb up. Well, that day happened to be really windy day, but I decided I'm gonna climb all the way up to the top, and then I got nervous because the tree started swaying, and on the way back down, I slipped and fell and fell on my right side and realized I couldn't get up. My sister came out, and she crying, and she says, "what's wrong? Get up. You know, Mom's gonna be mad" and everything, and I told her to go next door to go get Tony. And Tony was a nurse, and it happened to be her day off, so Tony came over, and her husband came over, and they called the ambulance and all that kind of stuff. So yeah, so that was, that was the downturn for me. I don't know, they were really rough with me when I went to Breckenridge hospital during that time, and this was in 63, they weren't very nice. I remember the nurses didn't smile. They just didn't treat you very nice, you know, they tended to you and stuff like that, but they they weren't kind like they are now, you know, asking you, you know, "are you doing okay? Can I make you work up?" Everything was stiff, and I remember being in there and I had to be in a body cast, and but something went wrong. I don't I don't know how my hip got messed up still when I have a body cast, but the doctor came in and said, you know, we're gonna have to take it off of her. And I don't know what else, but and my mom and my my stepfather weren't there. They were doing these things to me, and they weren't there, and I don't know why. I don't know if they ever talked to them or told them what was going on, but I remember the doctor saying, you know, we got to take this off of her. And as they started to do that, they started to just flip me over, not even telling me, you know, get ready, or anything like that. They just did it. And I was screaming. I remember screaming. I used to be terrified of hospitals, and that tired terrified me more when they were just doing whatever they wanted with me and and hurting me. And so the nurses were not compassionate. Nobody was hugging me or telling me anything. They just did what they had to do, and then flip me back over again, and redid the whole thing and and then they left me there. Yeah, they left me there in the bed. And I remember crying a lot, but I don't know that if, if that was the way it was supposed to be during that time in a hospital. This was a Bracken Ridge hospital and so,

Paulina Serrano 53:08

and did you go? When were you able to go back to palm school?

Toña Vasquez 53:12

No actually, I had to stay a year in the cast. So after they put the cast on me, I know they did talk to my mom, and they said, you know, she's she can't go back to school. Are you going to be able to take care of her at home? And she said, No, I've got to work. You know, he's got to work. And so they ended putting they ended up putting me in a in a nursing home, which was right across the street from where we lived in the stucco house during that time, there was a there was a, I don't even know the name of the nursing home. I never looked it up again, but it was huge, it's a big old nursing home and and so I was there for a year, and what year with old people and really scared. And my mom and my step father, my step father never came to see me. My mom would come and see me when she could, but a lot of the time, I spent that time by myself, and I was like 12 or 13 at that time, and I was there just about a year by myself. So that was really scary. I don't know how they did it for me to be out of school that time. I don't remember doing any homework or anything like that. Eventually down the line, I remember

my mom taking once I could get around and start walking and everything, my mom went and registered me at UJH. Yeah, and I started back to school. I don't know how they did it, or how they worked it with the school system that I never got grades for sixth grade. I just moved on to junior high and was in seventh grade,

Paulina Serrano 55:16

so that was then toward the end of your time at Palm Okay, so I mean, I I want us to rewind a little bit and come back to to your first years, like once you move from San Antonio, and then you start second grade and third grade and fourth grade and fifth and you talked a little bit about your friends. But what do you remember about your different classrooms, how the day to day at Palm school moved, or what you learned?

Toña Vasquez 55:50

Well, entering second grade, I was excited. It was new school, right? New friends and all that kind of stuff. And the teacher was really kind Miss Mullins. She was really nice. She was a white lady, right? And she had a soft voice. We I remember doing a lot of reading, right and writing, and then the one thing that she did all the time was, and this was new to me, because we didn't do that back in first grade when I was in San Antonio, but we had nap time. And the thing is, with Miss Mullins, she told us, you know, if you really go to sleep, you can have a quarter. And so I tried my best to go to sleep. And on occasions, I would get a quarter for going to sleep, to the point where she actually had to come and, you know, shake you to wake you up, right? So I don't know if that was like toward the end of or close to the bell before she woke us up. I never really remember how long she let us sleep, but I remember getting a quarter and having fallen asleep, so I thought that was pretty cool.

Paulina Serrano 57:25

How many kids would fall asleep?

Toña Vasquez 57:31

I'm guessing, more than me, you know, because I remember several of us going up to her desk waiting to get our quarter. It wasn't just me. So there, I'd say, like, three or four. Maybe we could have been more, but I remember a little, a little bunch of us was right there at her desk, you know, waiting to get our quarter. And it happened every time, you know, thinking back on it, later on, as I was older, I was going, did she do it so that way she didn't have to teach us in the you know, less kids to have to teach. Were we that difficult to teach? You know, since our English wasn't that great, you know? Or was she just being kind of nice? I don't know. She felt really sorry for us and felt like we needed money. So I don't know, but she did it, you know, and we fell asleep. I fell asleep. I took advantage of it.

Paulina Serrano 58:35

What sort of what sort of things did you learn, not just with Miss Mullins, but later on with Miss Reyes and your other teachers.

Toña Vasquez 58:42

Well, for sure, what stood out with Miss Reyes was the fact that, you know, grooming was important to her and should be to me. But of course, it took me a while to catch on to that, but articulating and being

able to speak correctly the way people, I guess, expected me to speak. So I really worked hard to do that, and became very conscious of it. Fifth grade. I really liked fifth grade with Miss Houston, she and I just learned from from Marcus. She was married to a football player from UT, and I'm going, Well, no, no wonder she was always energetic and happy. She was she was really a fun teacher and but she's the one that always told me my handwriting looked like chicken scratch, and I, most of the time, had to stay indoors to practice my my writing. I missed a lot of free time going outside to play because I had to, I had to practice my writing, but she was. Very creative. And the one thing that I really liked was she we had these radio plays so we could become these characters, and we'd read out of a book, right, and and then we'd put on a play for the classroom, and it was really fun. I remember those and and I wish we had some more of that. You know, the radio plays like that.

Paulina Serrano 1:00:27

What kind of themes would you act out or what kind of stories?

Toña Vasquez 1:00:32

Well, for sure, the one that that stands out the most for me was the one about a witch and have to been around Halloween or something, and we didn't have to dress up or anything. We just read out a book, because we're supposed to be pretending that we're on a radio, and we're telling the story over the radio, right? But I was a witch, and so I got to do all these weird sounds and stuff, which I thought was a lot of fun, so I enjoyed that. That's the one story that really stood out of my in my mind. But we all got a chance to tell these stories, and it was really fun. So I remember that, I think that's, that's the best thing that I got out of that, out of her classroom, was being able to express yourself like that and really enjoy a story. The other thing was going to concerts, Symphony symphonic concerts. So once a year, well, twice a year actually, because we got to go to the Nutcracker. They would board us a bunch of kids, and we'd go to the auditorium and go watch the Nutcracker, and then in the spring, we'd go again, and they'd have the symphony, and we get to go to the concerts at the auditor. And I loved it, and I think that's where I got my my love of music, especially symphonic Beethoven and Mozart and Czechowski all of those. I mean, I never knew who they were until I started getting the opportunity to be part of that group that got to go and listen to those concerts.

Paulina Serrano 1:02:13

Would you have to dress up to go to the symphony?

Toña Vasquez 1:02:18

I don't know. I don't I don't remember having to dress up, because it was during school, you know. So if I guess, if you wear your school clothes, you go right, but I don't remember ever having to dress up, but it was so much fun. I really looked forward to that. And they did it every year. So, and I wish some of the schools do it now, but not very often. And I think that's that's very sad, you know that they don't invest more into that.

Paulina Serrano 1:02:50

What do you remember about you mentioned a little bit about your teachers, but what do you most like remember most about your teachers and the administration?

Toña Vasquez 1:03:02

The only time I interacted with the administration was when I went in there to get my paddling. That's all I remember. And I can't remember his name. I don't remember if his name was Mr. Hildebrandt, um, but I remember he was a tall, white man, lean, kind of looking with a crew cut and and I remember when we walked down the hall past the principal's office, you could see the paddle hanging on the wall. You know, it was evident. I mean, they didn't hide it. It was there. And so, so yeah, so I got to experience that on several occasions, and it wasn't because I was cussing or anything like that. It was just because, at least for me, it was only because I kept talking too much and getting up out of my chair and so, and the teacher just, I guess, not being able to tolerate having to tell me time and time again to sit down and be quiet. And so I got sent to the office and and it usually happened at the end of the day where I get sent. So that way, right after getting my paddling, I could go home. And so I go home crying, and then my mom would get mad at me, you know, what's what's going on? Why are you crying? All this kind of stuff? And I would tell her, you know, that I wasn't listening. I was getting up and you know, she wasn't comforting me. She was also backing them up and said, I told you, when you go to school, you listen to what they say. You be quiet, listen. And occasionally she would tell me, these people know what they're doing. They went to school. That's why you're going to school, so you can learn. So you. And they say, be quiet. You be quiet. So that that was drummed into my head every day, every single day, and so that followed me through a lot of my school years, not speaking up, not you know, when I got to junior high, yeah, I had fun, but in the classroom, I was quiet. High school, I was quiet. I didn't engage a lot unless it was with my best friend, and then every once in a while, I would, you know, do something crazy. But for the most part, I just kind of secluded myself and just made friends, but those were the only friends I kept, and so it was. It was difficult. It was difficult never knowing what was going to be down the road later on, because we did, my family did, or I experienced being in the foster care system back then, and it was like the same being treated the same as those nurses from the hospital, very strict. No conversation, just being told, this is the way it's going to be. This is, and not even really what, what's going to happen this, you know, you're going to be here today and tomorrow, you're going to be over here. That's it, no in between, or anything like that. So, so yeah,

Paulina Serrano 1:06:35

and at Palm, you know, when, when you were paddled, or others were paddled. Was it just about the behavior, or was it also we, we've learned that there's, you know, people were punished for speaking Spanish. Was that also part of the that

Toña Vasquez 1:06:54

was part of it, that was part of it, yeah, because, I mean, all during it, didn't the other kids telling on you didn't stop till I got to fifth grade. But second grade on well, third grade and fourth grade were the hardest, because that's when the kids are telling on you. They, you know, they think it's funny, you know, and they they thought it was really cool to be able to tell the teacher "she's talking Spanish, and I can understand what she's saying", and, "you know, or she's talking about me because she's talking Spanish," or whatever. So, yeah, so that landed me quite a few paddles too, yeah. So if it wasn't the teacher sending me to the office to, you know, get counseled, or whatever, by the principal because I wasn't listening. I didn't stay in my chair. It was probably also because of the fact that the kids were telling on me that I was speaking Spanish, because that would also lend me in the principal's office. So, so, so, yeah, so there were all these things that were going on.

Paulina Serrano 1:08:09

And in terms of learning to go back a little bit, were there, was there any curriculum that taught about Mexican Americans in Texas. That you know of, did you learn about other Mexican Americans in the history of Mexican Americans in Texas?

Toña Vasquez 1:08:28

During my elementary years, I don't remember reading about Mexicanos or anybody significant. It was all white. It was all white. Yeah, I don't there could have been but, you know, I never heard of them. Remember reading about Thomas Edison and the phone, believe it or not, about polio, and who invented that? But they were all white people. I don't remember anybody standing out there were Mexicanos. I don't even remember us really celebrating during my during the school, school years, I remember celebrating the May pole dancing outside in May we were dancing the may pole, but I don't remember celebrating any Mexican holidays during that time, it could have happened, but they don't stand out. All that stands out to me is the may pole, crazy.

Paulina Serrano 1:09:52

And in terms of, you know, we talked a little bit about the expectations of your parents and education, but how did you feel about. Your your educators and your teachers, what were their expectation? Expectations for the students at Palm?

Toña Vasquez 1:10:11

Well, if I take them each individually, what I got out of Miss Mullins in second grade was just, you know, being quiet. I sat. I always sat in the back. So I remember never being called on anything. I never had to go up to the chalkboard or anything like that. I don't remember raising my hand and being recognized so I could respond to something. I don't remember any of that. I just remember sitting in the back, and then it was, you know, nap time. And yeah, I did some work, but I don't remember her really talking to me and saying, Oh, you're doing a great job, or whatever. Third grade, I just remember Miss Jordan being very stern and wanted it. Wanted things to be peaceful and quiet while she was standing there, and she always, she always had a ruler in her hand. She'd be in the front of the of the room, the classroom, and she'd be talking, and she always had a ruler in her hand. And of course, she would go around the room and use the ruler, you know, on the top of her hands. And so, um, yeah, she would give us homework, but again, she never called on me to answer any questions or to read aloud or anything like that. She may have been doing it with other students, but she never did with me. Fourth grade, Miss Reyes again, never had to read aloud, never had to really answer any questions. And each time in each grade, I was always sitting in the back. So I don't know if that had anything to, you know, to do with the fact that I wasn't putting any of myself forward, right, and engaging and stuff and so, yeah, so, you know, and she was a nice teacher, and the only thing that brought, brought any interaction from her with me was the fact that she had a brush for me in the mornings, and during spelling time, I had to go out and practice my my "ch's" and get better at that. So, but yeah, that was it. The only one that I really feel that even though she said I had my my handwriting was chicken scratch. Was Miss Houston in fifth grade, she was very interactive, you know, and called on all of us and, you know, and had us go up there and do all these radio plays and everything. And it was always a lot of fun. There was always a lot of stuff going on. And the occasions that we were outside and got to play,

she would play kickball with us, she would be out there. But then, you know, talking with Marcos, when no wonder she was out there, because her, you know, her husband, was a football player, at UT, I didn't, never know, so that's why she was athletic with us outside. So, yeah, so that's more or less how it was for me during elementary school.

Paulina Serrano 1:14:00

Were you part of any clubs?

Toña Vasquez 1:14:02

No, not during that time. I did sing for a little while, but again, a lot of the things that they did offer was after school, and I couldn't stay because I had to go home with my little sister, and especially as we moved further away, you know, it was a longer length of time to get home. And so, yeah, when we lived at Roy's taxis, it was like not even five minutes you could run home, and she could do that. But then we started moving further away and couldn't let her go by herself. Yeah, yeah. So no, I didn't I never, I never got there early enough to do anything early, and I never got to stay after school to do anything after school.

Paulina Serrano 1:14:53

Did you tell me a little bit about like, playing outside, like you? Like I. I'm sure, like, you loved playing outside, right? What was that like? And was there activities that boys were doing that girls were not doing that, girls were doing that boys were not doing, or were they playing with each other?

Toña Vasquez 1:15:15

If it was things like kickball, yeah, we, you know, we'd have the boys team and the girls team, and we would play, I don't even remember playing like baseball. That was a guy's stuff that they would do. But we didn't. We didn't play baseball. There was and then jump rope. They didn't jump rope. We did. So we were out there playing with that. And I'm trying to remember this may have been, yeah, this may have been only in junior high when we used to play Four Square. But there used to be a game that we used to play with a ball outside. But I don't think it was four square. I forget what it was. Oh, you know what it was, that tether ball. That's what that was, the tether ball. We all played that so, yeah, but the boys didn't usually play with us too much. Every once in a while, one or two would come and, you know, you know how they pick on the girls, and they'd go and hit the ball and stuff. But the girls played with the girls and the guys, again, played with the guys. Yeah.

Paulina Serrano 1:16:23

Was it the same in the classroom?

Toña Vasquez 1:16:28

Yeah, yeah. It was, yeah. We didn't. The only time we mixed and mingled was if the teacher had an activity where we had to mix and mingle. Otherwise, we're all separate. I mean, we all stayed in our desk and didn't interact with each other. They we didn't even have really groups that they put us in groups. Now I do remember, excuse me, during music. I used to like to go to music, because back then, we had square dancing. And I didn't realize till later on, when I was reading up, why they had square dancing. But we did have square dancing, and we had to learn to play, to dance with the boys,

which, of course, you know, when you're a little kid, you don't want to be touching a guy's hand, and the guys don't want to hold the girls, right? But we did it anyway, but it was fun. So we did have a lot of square dancing.

Paulina Serrano 1:17:31

Do you remember any of the songs?

Toña Vasquez 1:17:37

I don't remember. I remember some of the word do see doe. You know, here we go, Doe see doe, go to the right, and then go to the left, things like that. But I don't actually remember the songs. But I remember, you know, dancing and we were all laughing and stuff, making light of it, but, but, no, I don't remember a lot of the songs, actual songs, but, and

Paulina Serrano 1:18:04

you mentioned, some of you mentioned May Day, were there other other holiday programs that the school put on that you remember? And maybe you can talk a little bit more about the the May pole and what that that was like.

Toña Vasquez 1:18:24

I remember it kind of looked kind of fancy. We had to dress up, right and and even the guys participated in that, in the May pole, but it was mainly the girls, but there were some guys doing some stuff. But I don't, I don't remember like the music, or how we practiced, or anything like that. All I remember is being outside, and we all knew which direction we were supposed to go in and sing this and dance to the song, right? And so. But other than that, yeah, no, I don't remember any of the other details.

Paulina Serrano 1:19:08

Would people from the from like, out of like, from outside, parents? Would they come in and join during any of the festivities?

Toña Vasquez 1:19:17

Uh, yeah, I don't know if they joined, but there were a lot of spectators, and I remember always doing it outside in the front where the palm tree is. That's where, that's where all of that took place. Any any kind of festivities. I don't remember even celebrating like Easter. I don't remember celebrating any of those, except for the may pole and then dancing around with them, with the Doe si doe and all of that.

Paulina Serrano 1:19:53

And what would you say that i. Like the role of education in those years at Palm like the the the role they had in your life, from, you know, second grade to fifth grade, what was what role did those years have play in your life?

Toña Vasquez 1:20:23

I guess for me, I guess, I guess it gave me direction, because I, even as I kept moving forward in my life, I always remember them. They left me with something, right. And then I've shared those stories with my kids of how it was, because they'll ask me, Well, what was it like when you went to school?

Grandma? Where did you live? You know? And so, so, yeah, all my kids know where I went to school. My friends know where I went to school. My grandson knows where I went to school. And actually he goes to the Palm school now, and so he thinks that's really cool. And and I told him, We need to go. We need to go visit. I said, you can't go inside the building, I said, but you'll be able to go look, and that's where I went to school, because he'll ask me, you know, what was it like when you were growing up? You know, where did you live? Did you have friends? He'll he asked for details. And so, so, yeah, so I've carried it all the time. And then when they started, when the when the talk about what to do with the building came up, that really bothered me, because I said, with the things that are happening, all the gentrification that's happening in East Austin, it's like our footprint is disappearing. You know, our past, our history, I don't think we share it enough with people so they don't understand what's going on. And especially if you're new to town, why would you even care about the history? Because you were you weren't here. You don't you're not friends. You didn't grow up with the people that were here. You know, you're new to the place, and a lot of people don't have time to learn history. They came here with a purpose, and that's what they want to accomplish. And so when all this stuff started happening in East Austin, I got really upset, and I started talking to people, you know, I've, I've helped organize a lot of things, and I think that's why i i look at my past where I was, and even though I may not have had a lot of joyful moments, it was okay, because if I hadn't gone through a lot of that, then would I still be the same person I am today if I hadn't gone through all of that? There's a reason I feel for me. There's always been a reason for having had this path that I followed, or that I that I have experienced these things. Because I, you know, when I talk to my kids and my grandchildren, I tell them, you know, if this had never happened to me, would I be the same person that I am right now? If I hadn't had that experience, would I have had the path that I followed now? Would have had the courage to stand up and, you know, do the things that I've done with other people. If I hadn't had that experience, you know, I would have really been ignorant, not understanding, you know, where our people in East Austin came from, where we grew up. And yes, we are nostalgic. I even had. I went to see I took a parent one time to go meet the mayor, because we wanted to talk to him about how the city is has a lack of doctors who don't want to serve people on Medicare on Medicaid. And we went to and I took a parent, and I told her, this is your opportunity to tell them why they need to invest, you know, in Medicare, and to talk to these doctors to take patients who carry Medicare, Medicaid. And so we were there, we were sitting there, and she was sharing her story, her struggles, and all this kind of stuff. And he sits there and listens, but then he says, and then I forget what I said, but he said, so you don't want, you don't want the playing field to change. "You want everything to stay the same. The landscape can't stay the same. He goes, You know, I see what y'all do in East Austin." He goes, "I go to ya'lls fiestas all the time". And I'm sitting there, and she's looking at me, and I said, you can tell them whatever you want. And I said that in front of me, you can tell them whatever you want. How do you want to respond to that? And she was just so upset. She wanted to cry. And I said, we're not all about just celebrating. We have struggles, and that's why we're here with you. And so I don't know if you know what the political climate was really back then as I was going to school, because I didn't find any of that out till after I was older, you know. But I'm sure all this stuff was going on.

Paulina Serrano 1:26:19

And so in that note, I guess, you know, we're kind of in that, in thinking about the community, right? How did, how did the palm palm school, when you were there and to your, to your knowledge, how did it fit into the Mexican community? Like, how, what place did it take within the community.

Toña Vasquez 1:26:43

I'm sorry, could you repeat, yeah, so

Paulina Serrano 1:26:44

the palm school as part of the community. How did people see it? How do they interact with it? What did it mean to the to the community during the the years when you were there,

Toña Vasquez 1:26:58

it was a hub, right? Even though we didn't, it wasn't like open to the community and all, it was still a hub, because we were its children. You know, parents sent us there to learn, and so I believe that the parents felt like we were learning and we were happy the times. I mean, even with the times when we got paddled or anything like that. I mean, parents let it happen, but they knew that, I'm assuming, that they knew that that was part of being part of a school system, and they were willing, you know, to have us experience that, because in the long run, I guess the hope was for us to be, to grow up, to be good kids, right? And so, and there were a bunch of us there. We're all Mexicanos. We bonded together, you know, if nothing else, we shared that, that we were all Mexicanos, we had a good time, yeah, and we even the bad times that we experienced, we experienced it and we talked about it, right? And why would you want to tear down something that has a history where we shared our own stories together, and that's one great, big story. It's the house that that has all our stories, and it ignites our conversations. I mean, once they started to started, started talking about, you know, tearing it down, or whatever it's it sparked a fire, because that's where our stories are held. That's what brings us together. That's what brought us together when all that started happening and and just tearing a piece of that, that history, that footprint, that was our footprint. We we created there. My footprints are there somewhere that you probably can't see them, but they're there. There are a lot of footprints there. There's people that you know. I think about Linda, Linda Zapata. She lived on Rainey. Um, uh, she passed away, but her footprints are in that school building. She was a friend. We had friends that went to that school. I had my best friend. They went to school with me. We had good times. You know, her footprints are in there. So why would you want to tear somebody's footprints away like that? So that's important to me. That's why I share the story about the school with my with my kids, I went to that school, and they understand that just like when they talk about Zavala, and they wanted to change Zavala elementary over there in East Austin, we fought for that. And I said, y'all still have to stand up for that, because even though they say it's a historic marker, they could easily tear down that building and leave that stupid sign there saying that there was a time that there was a school here, you know, but it's, you know, it had to be torn down. But here's your sign. They could do the same thing to palm and just put a sign there and say this just, but no, we still have that building. That's more precious than a sign, right? And so, yeah, that that school building, you may not see it, but it's full of footprints, full of footprints, and I don't want that to disappear those I knew some of those footprints. And so, you know, good or bad I don't care. So, yeah, that's why it's important to me. Sorry.

Paulina Serrano 1:31:04

No, no, don't say sorry, and so I'll give you a second. You mentioned Zavala. Did your did your parents have a choice in sending you to another school other than palm?

Toña Vasquez 1:31:22

I don't know if they had another choice. I think they I think my mom just sent it, sent me there because of a convenience, because it was right there. And like I said, My mom never, she never went to any of my activities. To any meetings or anything like that. But I guess she felt secure in knowing that at least the school was there, and if she needed to go, it was close by, right and and I don't know what the policy was that if you lived on this side of I 35 or that side of I 35 if you had a choice, I don't, I don't believe you probably had a choice back then. You know, I guess I 35 was a dividing marker. I'm not sure.

Paulina Serrano 1:32:19

It may have been, I think there was a marker. And just from, you know, talking to folks, there was a marker, and some went to Zavala, and some went to palm and I believe it was, I 35.

Toña Vasquez 1:32:32

Yeah, yeah. I'm thinking there was, I really haven't looked into that history part of it, but I'm assuming, just because I worked in the school district, and I know every school, school has their boundaries, right, and so that they serve. So I'm thinking that that's what happened. So if you lived on that side, you went to palm and if you lived on that side, you went to either Zavala or Metz, whatever, but yeah, and it's funny because there had to have been the marker had to have been further than I 35 because if it wasn't, then how could Margo and Mary Lou and Jerry and Mario and all of them have been able to go to to palm and so I've never really looked at the boundaries, but, but yeah, I guess that they had to have extended it that far to get a good number of kids to fill up the school, Right? And it just happened that we were all Mexicanos. I don't remember having white kids in class.

Paulina Serrano 1:33:48

How did that make you feel? Did you notice?

Toña Vasquez 1:33:52

No, no, there had to been, there had to have been, you know, a few, but just a few, the majority were Mexicanos, and even then, I mean, you know, I I wasn't conscious of that. My mom, my stepfather, they never talked about race. So I never, really, it never made an impression on me to notice, you know, if there were more blacks or whites or whatever in a classroom, but I do remember there were a lot of mexicanos everywhere, you know. So I'm assuming that's what the majority, who the majority was there at that school?

Paulina Serrano 1:34:35

Yeah, kind of along those lines. So around the time, just checking the notes Brown versus the Board of Education is in 1954 and around this time, there's a push for desegregation. And so desegregation in elementary schools, and then I'm guessing later on in middle schools and high schools for you, they. You notice that? And how did that impact your time at Palm and then your time in schools outside of palm?

Toña Vasquez 1:35:10

We were, we were, I don't know. I must. I must be lucky. You know, a lot of us must be lucky, because the C desegregation here in Austin, it happened way late. Austin fought that. Segre-, you know, desegregation, UT fought that. You know, UT had let the school, the school system, borrow UJH, the School of Social Work, where it used to be, yeah, that was our school. And, and I don't, I don't, I never knew or really dug into it as to what actually made ut want their school back. But I bought a book, a hit, a little history book, and it explains what happened? Because it was like, I was in the eighth grade, and it was like from one year to the next, they were saying that the principal came and announced to the whole auditorium that they were going to close the school. They were building a new school, which was Martin junior high. And we were, you know, a lot of us were going to get split. Some of us were going to get to go to Martin, others were going to get to go to other middle schools, depending on where we lived.

Paulina Serrano 1:36:47

And that was when you were at UJH?

Toña Vasquez 1:36:51

University junior high. And so I learned UT was fighting like hell not to desegregate, right? Or they wanted to remain the same, and I don't think they really finally embraced it until close to the 70s, and then what ended up happening is they wanted their school back. So they told AISD, we're taking our school back. You're gonna get one. You're gonna have to get one built. And that's the reason we had Martin junior high

Paulina Serrano 1:37:35

and at UJH, what was the what were the students like?

Toña Vasquez 1:37:39

UJH, when they first built it, it was supposed to be a learning school or a teaching school for new teachers that were going into the career. And I wasn't there when they had this certain schedule, but at one point, only white kids got to go to school in the morning, and the Mexican and everybody else got to go in the afternoon. And that went on for a while. And then when I got ready to go to junior high, from, you know, after I went through all the Rigamoro, of my hip and everything, got to walk again. I got to go to to UJH, and I was there seventh and eighth grade. And then they, they built Martin. In the meantime, we had teachers. They had to make up UJH, with a bunch of kids from different areas of town. So we were a mix of black and white and brown kids. Alan had burned down, and so we were, there were a bunch of make and I didn't go to I didn't go to como se llama to Allen. At that time, I had just gotten better and got a chance to go to to the school, so I entered in the seventh grade anyway. So they mixed us up, and I never really got to have a chance. I thought it was cool, because here I'm coming from an elementary school that was the majority Mexicanos, and now I'm in a school where there's all kinds of colors, right? And that was so much fun. And we all got along. We all got along, and I think it was just because the experience was just all new to us. We accepted it, and we got along. And I think the administration did a great job. The teachers were so friendly and supporting. I don't remember having a bad teacher. Were there? Well, I remember my math dad, my math teacher. She was hard nosed lady. That lady was a math teacher, and you had to be really still in her class and just listen. You didn't get to talk. She actually had two rocks on her desk, and she would go around and

knock you in the head with a rock. She did me one time, yeah, if she would go around if we were having a test or anything, and she saw you, maybe at to me, I'm I'm guessing she was looking at my work as I was doing it, and I was writing down the wrong answer or something, and I felt it on my head.

Did she throw it or did she have no she had it in her head?

She had it In her hand and just hit me with it. And I'm going, ...it's not hard enough to make me cry, but I felt it right, and it's like, "okay, I'm doing something wrong, I guess", you know, but I don't remember if I look back over my work or whatever, but I had to have been doing something wrong for her to do that. But she she did that, and I saw her do it to other kids in the classroom. So other than her, all the kids, all the students, were getting along. We didn't have any fights. At least, I wasn't aware of any fights. And and then what started happening there is that we had so many black kids there that they were really good at sports, and we were winning championship games our school was and the other schools were getting angry, you know, because we were such a diverse group, we were doing so well, and we were really good at sports that the other school principals were complaining to the district

Paulina Serrano 1:42:05

were the teams predominantly black men, black, black boys or black girls,

Toña Vasquez 1:42:12

black, black boys and black girls.

Paulina Serrano 1:42:16

Yeah, and any, any mexicanos, Anglos, some

Toña Vasquez 1:42:20

Some Mexicans that were on the teams. Yeah, there were some, but the majority were black, but they were all good students. I mean, they were all friendly, but it was the other schools that were basically white and hadn't transitioned to a more diverse, you know, school at that point that they were complaining to district that it wasn't fair that our school was made up of all these kids and they're winning and all this kind of stuff. But it wasn't on us. It was on them, because they didn't want to they didn't want to change. They wanted to follow the same track. They wanted us to change. They wanted this school district to make the school change, right? And it wasn't. It didn't work that way. Yeah, so And after,

Paulina Serrano 1:43:09

and after, you U H, UJH, I'm sorry you were you went to the district kind of pulled everybody kids, here go, you go. There, you go, there. Where did you go?

Toña Vasquez 1:43:29

I went to Martin, Martin junior high. I was the first year it opened. It was great. And many of the kids that were at UJH, the black kids and the brown kids ended up here at Martin, and we still continue to do well, yeah, excelled at sports and had good programs and stuff like that. So yeah, the only thing that was that I was noticing at that time too was that our counselors weren't weren't shifting. Our counselors

were white, and the experience I had with a counselor when I got to ninth grade was I wanted to be with my friends who the majority of them were taking, like algebra, biology, all these guys. And I was placed, I didn't get to pick my classes. They picked them for me. I was taking fundamentals, fundamental math and fundamental English and all this. And I'm going. And I went to the counselor, and I said, you know, I "can I get my schedule changed.? I want to take biology and algebra and all those kind of stuff." Because those kids, my friends, they were talking about going to college, nobody ever talked to me about college. And here I'm going to the counselor, and she's telling me, "You know what? This. Is going to be a better path for you. Those classes are too hard for you," and I'm going, "but I want to take those classes. I want to learn those" and she says, "let's just stay with these and see how you do". She was not willing to change my classes. You know, eventually, when I got I didn't get to really change my classes till I got to high school, you know, but at Martin, I had to keep taking the same classes, and she wouldn't let me change my classes. It was crazy the way they were still thinking, you know, they saw me and they said, Oh, you're just probably gonna get pregnant and not work, you know, or get a job, but not a job in the office or anything like that. So nobody ever said it to my face, but I wasn't encouraged. And there were a lot of my friends that didn't get encouraged to take those classes good. They were told it was too hard.

Paulina Serrano 1:46:04

And your friends were the ones that were told not. They, that they you should, should take the the the path, uh, for fundamental classes, where they from palm or like friends that you ever

Toña Vasquez 1:46:20

Some of them were from palm and from U, j, h, yeah, when we got put together with other kids, you know, so yeah,

Paulina Serrano 1:46:29

were they also Mexican?

Toña Vasquez 1:26:31

They were also Mexican, yeah. So, yeah, so it, you know, whatever we carried from Palm, still carried, you know, I don't feel we're still being seen in a different light or encouraged to elevate ourselves other than you still need to go to school, right? And then, of course, you know, later on finding out, oh, they just wanted and wanted us in school for the funding you know, that the district needed, not really to, you know, get us anything new, you know, like new computers, or, you know, offer us higher level classes or anything like that. But just, you know, you keep going to school, your body is important. That's about it, not your brain. That's the way I felt.

Paulina Serrano 1:47:29

And so we've also heard similar things about opportunities, like at Palm with the palm pool, where there, you know, were like, you know, Mexican families were not allowed to go on certain days, and libraries and medical services, can you do you have any memories of that, or experiences in relation to the pool, library, or any, any sort of services provided at Palm

Toña Vasquez 1:48:00

No, I really didn't. I don't know, like I said, I don't know what it is. I never had to go through anything like that. The only, the only times that I experienced that I was different or looked different was when we would go to department stores, and people would follow us, you know, me and my mom, you know, we'd go to Woolsworth, and there would be people there, you know. And you could actually tell who they were and that they were following you you know, to make sure that you weren't picking up what you weren't supposed to be picking up. So and the clothing stores and stuff like that, yeah, I felt that. And I'm going, you know, I'm not going to steal anything because I don't have any money anyway, you know, but, and I've always felt like that, but, but, no, not in like swimming. I know, like I said, in my early years, I swam in the river, and then on occasion, I did swim in a pool at Palm, but I never felt like anybody didn't keep me from swimming. And then, you know, swimming at Metz and all that. I never felt that, yeah. The only time I felt like, you know, I didn't belong was when we were in a department store, clothing store, drug store, things like that. Yeah.

Paulina Serrano 1:49:37

What do you remember about, like, the the building itself. You know, the were there. Did you notice any like, what can you describe the building? Inside of the building? Did things work?

Toña Vasquez 1:49:50

Yeah, you know what I remember the most is the wood. I loved the wood, the smell of it at. Thought it was so cool, just to have all this dark, rich wood everywhere. I never saw anything broken down or felt like it was broken down. And then I always like the only thing that I remember breaking down are the water fountains outside, those would break down, and then we, you know, we'd be playing and we'd be thirsty, and then we couldn't have any water because the faucets weren't working and stuff. But, but as far as, like inside the building, everything always looked good to me, you know, but I was just a kid, so I really didn't take the only thing that stood out was all of the wood. I love the the feel of the wood and the smell of it. I remember that a lot. Yeah, that crazy.

Paulina Serrano 1:51:02

What like? What it is. Can you describe it? What does it? What did it smell like? This,

Toña Vasquez 1:51:07

the smell, I guess, just just wood. It wasn't heavy. It was a light smell. You could just tell when you walked into the building that it was a good smell. It and I felt safe. It was just a good safe smell, familiar smell. So, you know, it just made me happy when I walked into the school, and especially rubbing my my hand, you know, against the railings and stuff, the smoothness of it, you know, the the custodians always kept it nice. The wood always looked nice and shiny. Um, the floors it was it was nice. It was nice. Maybe it was a wax that I was smelling, because I know they had to do a lot of waxing on that, right? But, but it was a nice smell, a nice comforting smell.

Paulina Serrano 1:52:09

And going back to the neighborhood, you know, we, we know it's a huge part of kind of the experience at Palm. What can you tell us about some of the surrounding areas, like Juan is Lincoln superior dairy, the pharmacy or like the comic book shop. Do you have any memories of those places ?

Toña Vasquez 1:52:29

We used to we did field trips to superior dairies, which was really cool. And then down the street, when you cross the bridge there was, there was a beauty shop, and there was a pharmacy right there. And my mom used to like to go to the beauty shop, and every once in a while, I she would take me to get my hair cut and done right there. And I don't remember the lady's name, but my mom, my mom and she got along really well. They would talk for hours while our heads were under the the big domes, you know, getting dry and stuff. But that was a lot of fun. And then the drug store that the Senor there, I don't remember, I don't remember his name, but he was always real nice. And when we'd walk in there, I can hear the bell still. When we opened the door, it would ding right, and there was a lot of wood in there too, and it always smelled really good, and I remember there being saw dust on the floor because the floor was wood, right? And I never understood why there was saw dust on the floor. But, you know, eventually I learned that you yourself are helping them wax the floors and keeping them clean when you're stepping all that stuff. So and there was a lot of glass. There were glass counters, just glass, and it was always clean. It was always clean. Always like that. You could see everything. So and so we always had to be careful. My mom always kept telling us, "baja tus manos, no estes tocando nada". And I'm going, okay, you know, because we wanted to touch everything. And so I can imagine that poor man was probably cleaning windows all day long, you know, because our smudges were everywhere. But yeah, it was, it was a cool store.

Paulina Serrano 1:54:32

Did everybody at these places? Do they speak Spanish and English? Or would you go out and to different stores and places. And just like hear, only Spanish, only English.

Toña Vasquez 1:54:46

I heard a lot of Spanish everywhere, everywhere, especially with the restaurants up and down the the streets there and the hustle and bustle of Mexicans walking around. I mean, we. Were everywhere. And I love the fact that, you know, the moms were walking down the sidewalks with their babies in the strollers and and the kids, you know, fighting as they kept walking down the street with their mom or whatever. But yeah, there was a lot of Spanish language everywhere, and it was great. Just it just felt like home. You're home with your with your family, bigger family, right? Extended family. I really like that. And we didn't have dogs all over the place. We did have dogs, but they were penned up, right? But Ma, it was mainly people. Mexican was out in the streets, walking around and stuff, not really a lot of cars. I don't remember feeling like there were a lot of a lot of traffic or anything, because a lot of people walked. Yeah.

Paulina Serrano 1:56:03

so we're moving a little bit after after palm. Now a little bit. Can you describe your life after finishing palm? Now, you talked a little bit about it. How you know your your accident kind of forced you out. But can you talk a little bit about your life after palm?

Toña Vasquez 1:56:19

After Palm, after Palm, I went to UJH, and made a lot of friends there. The atmosphere was great. Always looked forward to school. I remember a bunch of us. In order for us from East Austin to get to UJH, we had to ride the bus. And I have never ridden the bus since then, but every day we had to ride

the bus. So we would catch the bus on First Street, and it would take us to downtown, to where Woolworth, Woolworth used to be on, on South, on Congress. And is it Eighth Street? Yeah, it had to be a street where Woolworth used to be there. We would all get dropped off there because we had to transfer to another bus. And that second bus is the one that took us, you know, to UJH, and that was every day we would have to do that. And this was a school bus. No, this was a city bus. We had to take. It was a city bus. I don't know why we didn't have a school bus, but we had a city we had to take the city bus, and it came out of our pockets to have to pay for that. So I don't know how my mom gave me money every day, but I had money every day to get to get to the bus. And that was seventh and eighth grade. We had to do that after that, then we I had to go to Martin, and I was there for Martin. Martin was a lot of fun, especially since it was his first year and we had the first boy, Manuel Rios, who is the first boy to be a cheerleader at our school, in a middle school. So we were all every time we went to a football game, oh, my God, all the girls went crazy from the other schools. They thought we were cool because we had a boy on our cheer leading squad, and everybody liked it, yeah, everybody liked it, yeah. I was surprised he had the nerve to even try out to be but, you know, he was cute. He was cute, and I don't know, I'm guessing he did it because he'd get a lot of attention from the girls, but he was good. You know, he could carry the girls and pick them up, and could do all the jumps and stuff. So I don't know if it was in his DNA or whatever, but, but he was good,

Paulina Serrano 1:59:13

and were there any so the cheer squad was it mostly, well, you're at Martin now, so it's integrated, right? So there's all different types of people. What was the like? The demographic of the cheer squad?

Toña Vasquez 1:59:29

It was a mix and black, white and Mexicanos. Yeah, it was a mix. It was a good mix. And they did really well. They did really well. So, and that was a lot of fun, but we felt that we were just special because we had a guy on our team so

Paulina Serrano 1:59:48

and then after Martin,

Toña Vasquez 1:59:50

after Martin, I ended up going to Johnston, and when it was Johnston, I only went there in the ninth. And 10th grade, because before was it, yeah, I went there in the 10th grade, after the summer of the 10th grade that we had another tragedy in our family. And I had a little brother that died. He got hit by a car. My mom ended up having a breakdown, and my step father ended up having a heart attack, and had to get sent to the VA hospital. My mom was in the Austin State Hospital, and by that time, I was 16, and I had my sister and I had my two little brothers. Well, I had my two sisters and my two little brothers. And so we ended up getting, actually, we were alone a couple of days. I was alone with the with the kids at and we lived in the projects on East Second Street, and I was thinking, Okay, I'm gonna have to quit school and stay home and take care of the kids and stuff. And I was ready to do that. And I had a boyfriend, and he was willing to, you know, quit, to quit school and help me, because I didn't want us to be separated and but eventually, social worker came around, and again, they've said, we're going to find you a home and try to keep you all together. But it may, may be that we can't, so y'all are going to end up probably being split up. But she didn't go into a lot of detail, other than I told her, Well, I'm not

going to go to school anymore. I'm going to stay home with the kids. And she says, No, you're going to school, and if we can't find a home for you all together, then we're going to split you up. And that was it. I had no say in the matter. So we did get split up. We get sent to a foster home, my myself, my brother and my sister lived in Buda, in a foster home over there, and we were lucky that that family was really nice and good to us. Then I had a baby sister who, at the time, was February, March, April, May, June. She was almost six months, and she ended up having to go to a separate home because she was a baby, and this family couldn't take care of a baby. So we got split up and and I had already and that year, I had had surgery on my hip again because I was having trouble with it. So they said we're gonna have to find you another family because I couldn't walk a mile in my crutches to go catch the bus and so. And it's real funny, because the social worker would only come and she just report out, you know, this is what's going on right now, and this is where what's going to happen next week, or not happen next week. So it took a while for them to find us a home, to get back to Austin, and by that time, I was off my crutches, and they needed to find me a family to where we could be close to a school so I wouldn't I would be able to get there, you know, without too many, too many problems. And they found us a family, and we ended up going to Mainer. So for my So, for my junior and senior year, I ended up going to Manor and my sister, my sister was really sad, because eventually my mom came out of the state hospital, and she ended up moving back into the projects on corta Street, and during those times, there were a lot of drugs, a lot of gangs in that neighborhood and a lot of fights and things like that, and my sister wanted to go live with her, with my mom, and I said, and I was telling her, she can't, you know, you can't live with mom, because mom's just barely, you know. Gonna get it together, and but she wouldn't listen. And my my foster parents tried to talk to her, and but she ended up running away and going back with my mother. And by doing that, she ended up getting hooked on drugs, and it was not good. My and I ended up staying with the foster family, and my brother did too. They ended up adopting him, and they helped me finish going to junior high and high school and and my baby sister ended up getting adopted permanently, so I never got to see her again, till way, way, way later. But during this was,

Paulina Serrano 2:05:52

this was right after you all right, after you left palm right, because you were still on, on the on the crutches, and then you went, while you were in in foster care, you went to middle school and then high school, okay,

Toña Vasquez 2:06:10

yeah. So during all that time, it was like, it was almost stress to me and to us as foster kids, you have to be good. You have to follow the rules. Don't make any waves. You do as you're told. So that really stayed with me, too for a long time. I yeah, I made friends, but even then, I didn't I wasn't good at expressing myself. Stayed mainly to myself, and you know, the systems were not made for me. They didn't help me. They just told me what to do during that time, I the school system was the same, you know, you go to school, you have to be there every day. And even when I asked for extra things, they were not given to me. You know, they just said, Well, no, you should probably stay here and keep doing this. It wasn't encouraging, right?

Paulina Serrano 2:07:28

And so what do you think? Or how do you Where does palm school then fit into your life? What does it mean? What does it symbolize for you, your time there and then I also, you know, thinking of preserving it.

Toña Vasquez 2:07:50

I think by this time, I started questioning, you know, that the only way I'm going to get ahead for myself is to learn to assimilate. So that brought me back to palm. They set the stage for me to have to assimilate. I could not speak Spanish. I had to really speak English, you know, I, I couldn't, you know, if I didn't follow the rules, there were going to be consequences, and more than likely, they were going to hurt physically, right? And so, you know, I asked myself, well, I was in high school, you know, if I continue to not assimilate, if I don't assimilate, and if I break the rules, what they think I'm breaking? How they see it that I'm breaking the rules, what's going to happen to me? You know, am I going to, you know, get to do anything that I want to do because that really they had stifled all these different systems. Had stifled my creativity, creativity, my my opportunity to really imagine myself being in a better place, because I struggled during all this time, and I didn't really have anyone around me, even when I thought I could reach out to somebody, I the response I would get is, it's okay, keep you're okay, keep doing what you're doing. And, you know, stay on this path. There was never really any broader opportunity. And so I feel, I feel like that kept taking me back to when I was a little kid, you know, yeah, I could have fun. Yeah, I could do this. But once I got back in that building, it had to be this way. You have no choice. And so that's what I felt when I was in in high school, middle school, it felt like when I was at Martin, it just felt a little bit freer, right? And I forgot for a while about the framework that I came from, from from palm. But then when I hit high school, it's like it took me back. It took me back to the fact that I had to be conscious of the way I pronounced my word. I had to be conscious of the way I dressed. I had to be conscious of following the rules and making sure that I understood them, because I didn't want anybody coming back and and get mad at me, right? I mean, that's what the that's what the foster care system told me, too, you have to follow the rules. You have to listen, you know. And so, you know, in my later years, it just kind of made me think, okay, I I'm back at Palm, but having to follow rules and so, so, yeah, so, you know, it was, I had good experiences At palm, but then it la.., it left lasting things in in with me that I still carry, you know, and you know, I had one person tell me, you need to let go of all of that. And I said, you know, and I ...it made me angry. How can you let go of that, that was part of your DNA from back then? You know, I can't let go of it. Maybe I can let it subside a little bit and learn from it and make sure that it doesn't happen to anybody else. And I think that's what's driving me, or driven me, or driving me when I work with people, especially when I was working for the school system and I was working working as a parent engagement lead organizer, to to work with people and help them find their voice and that they have a right to be at The table and make decisions for themselves, even though this system is telling you you have no right to do that. And I'm going, Yes, you do. And so, so, yeah, so all of that is not buried. It's on the surface. And I carry it there at the surface. It's not deep inside of me. It's on the surface. I got to keep it at the surface, because I that that keeps reminding me that, yeah, we're moving on. But there's things here that keep us moving on. It keeps me moving on. And, you know, I'm not afraid anymore, especially now, being 73 you know, whether you like me the way I am or not. At you know, I take me as I am or not. It's okay tell me what you want. I had some kids, you know, at one point in in one of the schools, some kids started cussing when I was that I worked as a parent support specialist at Johnston, and there were a lot of kids over there skipping school and everything, and the principal hired me to work as a parent support specialist

there, but mainly work with the kids, find out what the kids are doing. Where are they going to be doing because they were skipping school, left and right. So I had a blue van and I and he would tell me, you pick your hours when you want to when you want to work, but I want you to check on the kids. And so every morning, right around 8:15 I drive around to school, and I knew where they stopped and hung out, and they would always roll their eyes up because they knew I was coming. And they say, Why do you keep following us? And it's because your mom and your dad sent you to school, and where are you? You're fixing to catch the bus to go, I don't know where, and they're thinking, you're here at school. Well, it doesn't matter, and they'd start using their cuss words and everything and and I say, Well, you can cuss all you want I've heard every single word. I've even used a couple of them myself, so it's no surprise. But I tell you one thing, I'm gonna get to know who your mom is, and "well you don't know who my mom is", and I say, well, because you're out here now, I'm gonna know who your mom is. I'm gonna go in that school. I'm gonna go find out where your mom is. And so I did that every day, every day.

Paulina Serrano 2:14:42

What year was this? I'm sorry, when, when did, when did you have this job? What year when

Toña Vasquez 2:14:46

did I have this job? In 90 See, I was a pickle in 20...97 Yeah, that that I was doing this. And I. Loved it at risk kids. They call them at risk. They're Mexicanos. They come from my neighborhood, you know? They're, they're, it's a culture, you know, and the only people that you can talk like that to have to be like you, Mexicana, Hispanic, right? That a white guy can't, or a white woman can't come in there and talk to those kids like that, right? Because the minute they start cussing you, they're going to report them and take them to the office. What the heck. I remember my, my, my girls, both my girls were were in they were come si dice and life guards at Zaragoza Park. The aquatics department couldn't find life guards that would work in East Austin, in Montopolis or Zaragoza, Givens, they couldn't find they were struggling. They had really nice, good looking girls, and guys, white guys, white girls working in their they couldn't, they couldn't furnish, and nobody wanted to come and work over here. And I told my girls, y'all, y'all, need to go over there and apply. And so, and they were swimmers, so they applied, and they got the job, and so both of them got to work at Zaragoza. And let me tell you, the kids would go in there. You "Don't boss me. You don't know". They didn't mess with my girls, because they knew how to talk to them. "Well, you know what? If you're not going to listen, then you can just go, you're not coming into this pool". They weren't afraid to tell them, you know. But then again, you if you grow up in that culture with Mexicanos, you can do that, and the kids are going to listen, you know. Unless they go to the extreme right, you're going to have some of those. But for the most part, when you grow up in a neighborhood that understands that we watch out for each other, whether they're your kids or not, you're gonna you're gonna take care of each other. My I had a son that ran all over the place, skip school and everything, and my neighbors would say they'd call me, or they'd come over the house. "oyes, you know where your kid is, right now?" "no, donde anda" "anda en los courts, y anda con aquel huerco que esta haciendo esto y lo otro." And I go, Oh my god. So my neighbors, even, you know, and we would do that for each other, and it was okay, right? And so, and I think that's what we had when we were growing up at Palm two, you know, we took care of each other, we talked to each other, we knew what kind. And actually, there was an incident when I was going home from when I was still at Palm and I was walking my my sister home. There was a I was in the fourth grade. She was in a third grade,

second grade, and we were walking home, and there was a fifth grader, and he was a big guy, big burly guy, and he followed us home, and he was picking on my sister and and we lived right where, I told you, the billboard is by holiday inn and he was following us home. And he went over there and pushed my sister. Well, I turned right around and pushed him back and started beating him up. And let me tell you, by the time I got home, he went off. By the time I got home, my mom already knew that I had gotten in a fight and but I tried to reason her, and I told her mom I did it because he pushed Florinda down. And she goes, I mean, "A mi no me importa, yo te dije que no estes peleando y quien sabe que" and she took out the belt and she was gonna spank me because but the neighbors had already told her, so that's the kind of neighborhood it was then, right? People looked out for each other, for each other's kids and things like that. It doesn't feel like that anymore. It hasn't felt like that in a long time anymore. You know, people put up walls. There's fences everywhere we I lived on, well, I live on Santa Rosa street, and they built a new house there, and some mulios came and moved in. And, you know, we have dogs in our house, right in our yards and stuff. We have chickens, we have all this stuff. We're used to it. We don't complain. In fact, we'll come over there and ask, Hey, you have some extra eggs or whatever, right? These people walk, moved in there, and. And they came and complained that the dog was barking too much, and why do we have chickens? We shouldn't have chickens in the neighborhood, and all this kind of stuff. And I said I got pissed. My sister in law lived next door to me. We were all living close together. My sister in law comes out and she goes, T no le digas nada, leave him alone. And I'm going, Nope. And I told him, I said, "Look, you should have researched some more about what this neighborhood is going to be like. Why you moved here. I know why you moved here, because you got a cheap house. You're going to live in it for a little while, and then you're going to sell it and make a profit. And you know, we won't matter, but in the meantime, you better know why we have dogs. We have dogs because we don't have the fancy alarms. Those are our alarms. They record. They'll bark at anybody they don't recognize, and that alerts us. So that's why we all have dogs. Chickens. It's because we like chickens. We like animals. My those are my mother in law chickens. She likes to have her own eggs. So yeah, if you want to complain, go ahead and complain, but you better believe we're going to tell you something" I said. "So you should have researched before you move in. And just to let you know, we play our music loud on the weekends too. I do especially." and so yeah, after that, he didn't say a word to us, but people. But, you know, things were, times were different. People, you know, knew we had to have our own little spaces, but even then, we were willing to share right all the time. And so it's not. It's not like that anymore. Sad, yeah.

Paulina Serrano 2:21:46

Well, thank you. And I just want to ask, is there anything else that you would like to to add about palm that we haven't already talked about? Are there any other experiences you want to share?

Toña Vasquez 2:21:58

about palm? Other than that, I'm glad I got a chance to to go to palm and that it was part of my growing up. Even though I was a kid, I still experienced a good time. I made friends, and even though we have been disconnected all these years, it's palm that brought us back. I reconnected with a lot of my friends from Palm right now. And so even though it may be insignificant to others, it's because they, they they never went there. They hadn't had that kind of experience there, and we did, and we still feel a big connection for it. I still feel a huge connection, and I'm so grateful that I got to reconnect with a lot of my friends from back then, and we get to share our memory again, you know, give or take whatever it is,

and it brings back memories of my own family, the struggles that we had, but then the joys that we had. It helped me grow up. It helped me have something to fall back on that I can share with my kids, to get to know who I was too during that time, and to show them you know the landscape, even though the landscape may have changed, they can still drive through East Austin and tell you my grandma went to that school. She lived in this house, in this house, this house is no longer there, but that spot is where she lived. They can tell you where I've lived, and, and, and it's because it all started when I came to Austin as a little seven year old and entered palm school. So that's where my life started, and this is where I am today. So I'm happy.

Thank you, Tonya,

thank you. Thank.