

Palm_School_Quintanilla_Anita

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Palm School, Anita Quintanilla, Travis County oral history, community education, political participation, family dynamics, childhood experiences, Rainey Street, Mexican American history, assimilation, education emphasis, neighborhood identity, activism, gentrification, cultural heritage.

SPEAKERS

Anita Quintanilla, Sergio Barrera

Sergio Barrera 00:00

Today is Saturday, December 14, 2024. Wow. My name is Sergio Barrio and I am interviewing Miss Anita Quintanilla in Austin, Texas for the Travis County oral history project. We are at the University of Texas at Austin campus. Thank you, Miss Quintanilla for agreeing to this interview. The raw, unedited recording of this interview will be archived at the Travis County archives, where it will be available to anyone who wishes to access it. As we said earlier, if there is anything you don't wish to talk about, we respect your wishes. Also, if there is 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 are going to talk about your life experiences, particularly as it relates to the palm school. We'll also discuss your relationship to community education and political participation, and if you're ready. Ms, Quintanilla, let's begin.

So the first question that I have for you is, could you please tell us your name and also your relation to palm school?

Anita Quintanilla 01:00

Oh, boy. Remember this happened over 60 years ago. So you're like, oh, okay, Anita Quintanilla and I went to palm school, first grade to sixth grade. So that was 1956 to 1963 and my younger sister and older sister and my brother also went to palm and my cousin Nancy.

Sergio Barrera 01:21

So very much. Family dynamic,

Anita Quintanilla 01:24

yes, Nancy and other cousins. Yeah, wow. So,

Sergio Barrera 01:29

in speaking about family, could you please tell me, what was your childhood like?

Anita Quintanilla 01:34

Oh, okay, I'll skip a few parts. Growing up on Rainey Street, it was really 51 Rainey. It was really two blocks. So we had a huge yard, so it was mostly me and my brother that were playing outside. So I became a Tomboy. You know, I was very athletic, very athletic back in the 50s, which I've written about. It was very woodsy. We had all kinds of wildlife, and the city neglected Rainey street next to the river, no gutters, no street lights. It wasn't paved all that time because they had in their mind to take it over some day, I bet. So they neglected it. No new houses were built, so yeah, it was like living out in the woods. I call myself a country girl because, yeah, always barefooted and climbing trees and playing with my brother outside. And yeah, and one time, we would usually play until it's getting dark. And we knew that, because the bats started flying around us and said, oops, it's time to go inside. Because, yeah, it's right there near the Congress Bridge.

Sergio Barrera 02:50

So in speaking about your family, what was your family dynamics like growing up?

Anita Quintanilla 02:55

Well, my father first he worked with Falstaff in the late 40s, 50s, Falstaff beer there on Fourth Street, I think. And then he went to night school to become realtor, and he had his office on East Sixth Street. Since God mid 50s, till two he he passed in 2005 so he was pretty much working up to his death they're on Sixth Street, so car insurance and other notarized, worked on taxes. Him and my brother, my brother worked in his office, also my brother, Ralph,

Sergio Barrera 03:35

what about your Yeah, okay, and

Anita Quintanilla 03:37

my mother. My mother's almost blind, so she never worked outside the house or drove a car. So she stayed home and took care of the four of us. Yeah,

Sergio Barrera 03:51

who were the the four siblings?

Anita Quintanilla 03:52

Okay, well, the first brother died in 45 or 44 Sammy, little Sammy. And then Linda was born in 46 Ralph was born in 48 I was born in 1950 and cat was born in 1954

Sergio Barrera 04:13

so five children altogether,

Anita Quintanilla 04:14

four that she raised. Yeah, okay,

Sergio Barrera 04:20

in terms of your family dynamic, and I know we spoke a little bit about how maybe your your mother was from Guanajuato, right? Or your father. My

Anita Quintanilla 04:27

father was born in Guanajuato, and they, they, they came to Austin, I think 1919, him and his two older siblings. So there were three children, and my grandmother was pregnant at the time, and so my father ended up having three sisters and three brothers. So

Sergio Barrera 04:45

when you remember your childhood, What languages did you speak growing up? Oh, boy,

Anita Quintanilla 04:52

our parents wanted us to become assimilated. They didn't teach us Spanish. Because they didn't want us to experience racism like they did. So we only had country music on the radio. My mother didn't know how to cook Mexican food because she went to the School for the Blind boarding school. Yeah, so it was pretty much American, American. Yes,

Sergio Barrera 05:23

did that? Did that come into play also with, you know, how is your, your the one Guanajuato, the Mexican side? Did that sort of get overshadowed?

Anita Quintanilla 05:32

Well, not when we went to my grandmother's house, who never learned English, and I didn't know we didn't know Spanish, but we go over there, and, yeah, I was Mexican, and I remember going in the kitchen, and she had a hogs head to make tamales that freaked me out. Yeah, so very Mexican at my grand, grand mother's house, and her her daughters were speaking to her in Spanish.

Sergio Barrera 05:57

So would you say that in your neighborhood, it was predominantly bilingual, English, Spanish,

Anita Quintanilla 06:01

on Rainey Street in the well, in the 40s and 50s, there was Mexican and Mexican American, because they worked downtown as janitors, cooks, maids, etc. So they would just walk to downtown. So yeah, in the 40s and 50s and 60s, Mexican and Mexican American. So they were speaking both languages, except for our family, yeah, and

Sergio Barrera 06:30

you saw that sort of change as time went on. Did one in the neighborhood or, yeah, because you're telling me, kind of in the 40s and 50s, it was very Mexican. Did that change?

Anita Quintanilla 06:40

It was changing a little bit, you know, in the 70s and 80s. Yeah, what was I gonna say? Yeah.

Sergio Barrera 06:50

So in speaking about your family, and it seems like, you know, you would visit your grandmother, and, you know, possibly cousins, right?

Anita Quintanilla 07:00

Los of cousins, especially uncle peppy, he had seven kids also, but they had to move to Corpus Christi because he got his degree in pharmacy in the early 70s, and no one would hire him because of racism. So they moved to Corpus Christi, and I remember our trips to Corpus Christi and the beach to visit him. Yeah, that's fond memories of the beach.

Sergio Barrera 07:24

So, so in terms of your family, what do you think was their like? What was their role in education? What did they think about education?

Anita Quintanilla 07:33

That's all they thought about and pushed on us education, education. So they wanted us not teaching us any Spanish, for it, to be proficient in English, to know English very well, and in high school, we, you know, to take all the college credit, you know, for college credit, yeah. So we, they were put both of them were pushing us to get a good education, especially my mother, because she didn't want us to marry. Yeah, yes. Never mind.

Sergio Barrera 08:04

I was gonna say, Could you, could you describe that dynamic? Maybe, of like, you know what it was like to be Latina, Mexican, American woman at the time, right? And then the role of education?

Anita Quintanilla 08:16

Oh, boy. It's a lot of mixed feelings, because at Palm school, I'm pretty sure most of the kids, almost all of them, weren't looking toward a higher education, and a lot of them were poor. They probably wouldn't be able to afford it anyway, so their interest was not in, you know, going on to college, but just surviving day by day, make it through elementary and junior high and maybe maybe high school.

Sergio Barrera 08:48

So how do you know about their feelings? Did your family communicate that with you? Did they have expectations, or was it more of a support, you know, like "echale ganas" type of situation?

Anita Quintanilla 09:01

No, no Spanish.

Sergio Barrera 09:03

Okay, no Spanish,

Anita Quintanilla 09:04

No they just encouraged us in the house. But as far as talking to other people or encourage, well, mostly in the house, to get a good education, emphasis on that and reading a lot. And I did read a lot.

Sergio Barrera 09:19

Could you tell me a little bit more about reading,

Anita Quintanilla 09:23

Yeah well, at Palm I loved going to the library, and there was a series of Native Americans written by the same author. And I loved reading all the book those books, because it seemed to just transport me to a different world. It was wonderful. So I just read all those and read other books, and of course, got an award at six right for reading the most books, having perfect attendance, running blue ribbon for the fast runner, etc. In fact, in the third grade, I made the decision on my own to not miss any days of school. So no missed days of school from third grade to 12, not one missed. Yeah, perfect attendance.

Sergio Barrera 10:08

I want you to take me back to the books about Native Americans. What was it that called to you, or how did they come across?

Anita Quintanilla 10:16

It was just being in a different world. So when I was reading it, I was there and not in the craziness of the 50s, and it was just calm, calm, maybe because of the nature and the spirituality. Maybe, you know, I don't remember that part, but that must have stuck with me, because I'm, you know, very spiritual now.

Sergio Barrera 10:39

And then I'm also very interested in what encouraged your decision since third grade to say, I don't want to miss school,

Anita Quintanilla 10:46

I just I didn't want to break any records. I didn't want to break any record. So I just kept going and kept going to have that perfect attendance, perfect attendance, and not miss anything. Because if I miss one day then the next day at school, I'm gonna be, like, at a loss So, yeah, every day.

Sergio Barrera 11:04

Were there any recognitions that you would get at the end of the year? Well, yeah, the perfect

Anita Quintanilla 11:08

attendance. Yeah, awards.

Sergio Barrera 11:12

So in terms of, you know, and I don't know if you can situate me geographically, how far did you live away from Palm school?

Anita Quintanilla 11:19

It was only like two blocks walk on Rainey Street, and there was east First Street. I still call it east first street instead of Cesar Chavez. I knew Cesar Chavez really well, and I know he wouldn't appreciate streets and monuments named after him, but that's another story. Yeah, I've been interviewed for about Cesar Chavez, but there, there was Palm school. We just had to cross East first street.

Sergio Barrera 11:42

So how did you how did you get to school?

Anita Quintanilla 11:45

We Walked. Well, yeah, we always walked, yeah.

Sergio Barrera 11:49

Did you do it alone with other people? Well, when

Anita Quintanilla 11:53

I was first going, of course, I walked with my older sister, and then later I walked with my younger sister and Rob, I guess we walked together because we were me and my brother were very close.

Sergio Barrera 12:07

So in terms of, was there any adults that would walk with you all.

Anita Quintanilla 12:11

I don't remember.

Sergio Barrera 12:16

In terms of, you know, your, your kind of, your, your first recollection of, and you said you started there in first grade, yes,

Anita Quintanilla 12:22

oh, I want to mention my first day of school, other students were crying, you know, asking for Mama. But I didn't cry because I had gone already to two years of kindergarten, which was just on the other side of IH 35 so I was already experienced with that, that separation. But the first book I read was entitled "The bear went over the mountain to see what he could see". And that must have stuck with me, and for the rest of my life, sent me, set me on the course to widen my horizons in life. So always wanted to go beyond and see and see what's there, and I did in my adult trial. You know, while I was at UT, I spent a semester in Mexico City and another semester in LA and then another semester I headed to New York City, where I ended up stuck, and that's another story.

Sergio Barrera 13:23

So walk me back to that first day of school. How did you feel now that you were going here? And also maybe, how did you feel knowing that you had a sibling that was also at that school?

Anita Quintanilla 13:36

I really can't remember the feeling, but I wasn't scared, because I was used to going, you know, kindergarten, my older sister and older brother were there, and my Nancy, my cousin was there. So I was excited and happy and looking forward to it. And always when school started, my mother would have us buy new clothes, so we had new school clothes. So it was just really nice.

Sergio Barrera 14:04

Do you remember any story about maybe a particular outfit that you like to wear to school?

Anita Quintanilla 14:09

Well before first grade? When I was at kindergarten, I had this beautiful yellow dress, and I think it had a little Rob and a little bird on it. So I just love that dress. So I might have worn it that first day or in first grade somewhere. I probably had a new dress for that first day.

Sergio Barrera 14:30

How important looking back do you think that first day was for you going to palm school?

Anita Quintanilla 14:36

Well, not realizing, but looking back, it was another stage my life. Wow, here we got public school, real teachers. I'm gonna learn a lot. I'm gonna meet new friends. So yeah,

Sergio Barrera 14:53

also, did you take your own lunch?

Anita Quintanilla 14:55

No, no no, we paid. I think it was \$3 for a whole week. And so in the morning, I would go there and pay the money for the week, and they would write my name now so I didn't have to pay each time. So we were we were covered to have their their food, but in the first grade, they didn't start us off with the regular hot meal. It was like grapes and plums and graham crackers. And then when they switched to real food, I was like, What's this? Where's my graham crackers and grapes? So that was weird without a warning, all of a sudden it changed.

Sergio Barrera 15:32

Did the food ever represent anything cultural or that seemed like home to you?

Anita Quintanilla 15:38

No, I don't remember. No, all I remember is when standing in line to enter the cafeteria, the smell of the food. And so for many, many years after, whenever I get a whiff of a similar smell, it would take me right back to the cafeteria.

Sergio Barrera 15:55

Yeah. Well, if you could describe that smell, what was that smell?

Anita Quintanilla 15:59

Just a mixture of the foods. I can't describe it, but when you you're passing a restaurant and you smell, you know, but it's different foods.

Sergio Barrera 16:11

What did the cafeteria look like?

Anita Quintanilla 16:14

It was huge, and it was all and it had a stage, so it was also used for performances and films. Yeah, was huge.

Sergio Barrera 16:22

What do you say that it resembled how cafeterias look like today?

Anita Quintanilla 16:27

Yeah, pretty much, yeah, yeah. But it was, yeah, square, yeah.

Sergio Barrera 16:32

So I want you to walk me through the classroom now, right? So thinking about, what do you remember about the classroom? And this could be from first grade, you know, all the way to sixth grade, because obviously we can't go year by year. But what were the classrooms like

Anita Quintanilla 16:48

in different locations in the building? I think first, second and third and fifth were on the ground floor, but anyway, fifth grade, unfortunately, was right in the front of palm school, next to the office, and that's where they paddled the students for speaking Spanish, and we could hear them. We could hear the paddling and the crying and screaming right next door. Of course, we never got that because we didn't know Spanish.

Sergio Barrera 17:22

Do did it still create a sense of fear and maybe insecurity to even be in that space?

Anita Quintanilla 17:29

Well, all the cruelty and violence at that school really affected me, and I felt like, God, you know, these students are from the Barrio, and there's probably, you know, domestic violence and other kinds of violence that they're experiencing. So they brought it to school. I don't know if I thought I wasn't a sociologist back then, but that's what I was thinking, like. I saw them as poor and somewhat traumatized. So yeah, I understood the cruelties that this of the students, and maybe even the meanness and impatience of some of the teachers. There's one teacher in the third grade who, when she got mad, she grabbed us by the shoulder and shake us real hard.

Sergio Barrera 18:21

Do you recall that happening to you?

Anita Quintanilla 18:24

Unfortunately, my best friend in the class was Priscilla, and she was a bad she said, a very bad example. And I one day, I copied, I did what she did. We both got it.

Sergio Barrera 18:35

So it was kind of a two for one, yeah. Do you remember what you had done?

Anita Quintanilla 18:39

I can't remember what we did. Maybe we were talking and she had said, had said, no talking because we were friends, and she was bad example and she didn't obey rules.

Sergio Barrera 18:59

And again, I want to, I want to think as well of the classroom. But could you describe the classroom as to, you know, were they seats, desks? Were there any posters online that, I mean, online on the on the walls, that you remember, what was the layout of the of a classroom like?

Anita Quintanilla 19:15

Like a regular classroom with the desks, chalkboard, I don't remember posters, but they probably had photos, you know, like for history and for math and geography and all that I don't remember, but I'm pretty sure the walls were covered.

Sergio Barrera 19:32

One of the things that we have learned from from other folks that that went to school in this period of time is that there were many songs that sometimes they would teach them. Do you have a recollection of any sayings or songs that they would teach you as a sort of tradition?

Anita Quintanilla 19:46

Well, at Christmas time, you know the Christmas songs we had, I really enjoyed the plays and pageants that we had at Christmas and Easter and other days, but that's all I remember. Or before going to first grade, in kindergarten, we would sing, Jesus loves us, but you know, that was when my indoctrination started. But yeah, I don't believe in all that now. But yeah, before going to first grade, we're singing that.

Sergio Barrera 20:14

But that never happened in Palm school.

Anita Quintanilla 20:18

No, I don't remember religious stuff, you know, there was the square dancing and other events that help us assimilate and become 100% Americans and erase our culture.

Sergio Barrera 20:35

And speaking about the culture, do you feel like you got a sense of Mexican American history or figures while you were at Palm school?

Anita Quintanilla 20:43

No, not at all. Nothing Mexican, just, you know, sometimes them students speak in Spanish, but, but that's it. No recognition of the culture,

Sergio Barrera 20:54

Not even of the community, you know, and any sort of like community talking about land markers or things like that?

Anita Quintanilla 21:01

I don't remember any of that, but once a year we had a fiesta, which was, you know, fundraiser for the school district, and there were, you know, community members, and they were speaking Spanish. And maybe there was a little bit of Mexican influence in the food and snacks that they brought, yeah, but I don't remember specifics. My mother didn't make this fabulous fudge every year for it.

Sergio Barrera 21:24

Could you describe what the Fiesta was like?

Anita Quintanilla 21:27

It was wonderful, like a carnival. People had, you know, all kinds of little snacks to sell for a penny or a nickel, and maybe little gangs going on. It was festive and fun, and in the community was there and and my mother was, you know, talking to other community members that she knew. So that was great, because she's usually stuck at home. So there she was with the community. And that felt good, but it was, it was just really fun and festive. Everybody was there, the kids, the students, the community, the parents.

Sergio Barrera 21:58

Yeah, was this something that was hosted, like, on campus?

Anita Quintanilla 22:03

Yea, on the grounds, once a year.

Sergio Barrera 22:04

Do you remember what time? Like, maybe like 16 de Septiembre or Cinco de

Anita Quintanilla 22:10

Oh I didn't know anything about 16 de septiembre. Yeah, I don't remember. I think probably spring, near Easter.

Sergio Barrera 22:22

So you said no, no, figures in terms of Mexican American, and you're talking about a little bit more Americanized. I So would you say that the history was more about us? History, Texas history?

Anita Quintanilla 22:33

Yes, God, the text school textbooks in the 50s and 60s. They, they, they put on a pedestal all the settlers and the pioneers and the presidents that turned out to be, you know, racists and had slaves, so in the Alamo and celebrating, you know, Columbus Day, all the three little boats. So, yeah, it was very to Americanize us and and polish the history so there was nothing negative about the history. So that, of course, they demonized Mexicans and Native Americans Indians. I mean, so that's was the training, or, I should say, indoctrination.

Sergio Barrera 23:27

Aside from history, what other subjects did you were you exposed to at Palm school?

Anita Quintanilla 23:34

I believe in English classes, when I started appreciating poetry and standing up, you know, in front of the class and presenting the poems and other stories so that that, I think, in fourth grade, that started me on that, that path of performing and love of poetry. And yeah,

Sergio Barrera 23:58

could you describe a story that maybe you would have in relationship to poetry, to performing spoken word, or things like this, and

Anita Quintanilla 24:06

at Palm school. Yeah, I don't remember, I don't remember what poems. I remember I would memorize poems and then which, that's what I did throughout my life with presentations. I wrote this very, very long poem in 1985 and I'd use it as an audition piece for for film and stage. And I memorized it, it was very long and depressing when I read it. People were crying. It's called "solitary confinement". But in at Palm school, I don't remember what I read. Probably Robert Frost. I like those, yeah. And then in fifth grade, I would start doing little performances.

Sergio Barrera 24:46

Could you describe what those performances were?

Anita Quintanilla 24:49

Well like one, you know, we're sitting at the desk, and we're supposed to be a comedy team, and so we would just NAB each other, I mean, jab each other, and just... A joke. What was it? I almost can't remember what we were talking about, but yeah, my little comedy skit we did.

Sergio Barrera 25:08

So were these a little bit improv, like involving theater?

Anita Quintanilla 25:11

improv? Yes, yeah, we were doing improv, which I took on in later years. Improvisation.

Sergio Barrera 25:23

Aside from from learning, you know, I'm assuming you had your regular math that you were learning in other subjects.

Anita Quintanilla 25:30

Yeah, I really don't remember math at Palm I remember in high school I was making A pluses and geometry and trigonometry and those. So evidently, I was good at numbers. But, um, I don't remember. I just remember the English class and the history class, and in the fifth grade, they took all the girls in one room of fifth grade to teach us about menstruation and how to use sanitary napkins. So that was, you know, what they did back then in the fifth grades.

Sergio Barrera 26:01

Could you describe what that was like?

Anita Quintanilla 26:05

Confusing, because I didn't know anything about sex or anything, anything, so I was like, What's this? I just listened to them and it was quiet, and took it all in. And I might have, might have mentioned it to my mother, and she might have explained a little more to me,

Sergio Barrera 26:20

Did they was this like a class that was embedded within the curriculum, or they would remove you all and then bring you back to the class.

Anita Quintanilla 26:27

There were 3/5 grade classes, so all the girls from the three classes into one classroom. And I don't know if they brought an outsider or one of the teachers, but they would go through the whole, you know, instructing us on all the female body, what happens and now all that.

Sergio Barrera 26:44

So do you remember these as a series of lectures, or like a one time thing?

Anita Quintanilla 26:47

That was just a one time deal in fifth grade.

Sergio Barrera 26:51

Were there any other instances in which they would pull you all out and talk about other topics that weren't maybe related to

Anita Quintanilla 26:56

No, no, that one, only that one,

Sergio Barrera 27:01

and never did it to the boys either.

Anita Quintanilla 27:02

Well, I they might have had, yeah, something for the boys, but they didn't tell us.

Sergio Barrera 27:09

So if you could look back, what was your favorite subject at Palm school?

Anita Quintanilla 27:12

I guess English, because of the literature and the poetry and the stories and the books. Yeah. Yeah.

Sergio Barrera 27:22

Do you remember any teachers that stick out to you from Palm school?

Anita Quintanilla 27:24

About the books or in general?

Sergio Barrera 27:25

In general?

Anita Quintanilla 27:27

Well, at fourth grade, I had Mrs. Pepple, and she was a wonderful, wonderful teacher, and she had a celebrity friend, cactus Pryor, who was also her neighbor. And each year we would have, you know, fund, right? Each class would have fundraisers to raise money so that if your class made the most money, you would be the queen or king of that that classroom. And I was the queen of the fourth grade. And she had this fundraiser with this celebrity, but afterwards, she shared, shared the money with the other 2 4th grade classes. So at first I was, like, a little upset. I wanted us to keep all the money so that I would win, but she shared it with the other 2 4th grade classes. And afterwards I understood that that was that was only fair. And then in the sixth grade, Mrs. Shorts, another wonderful, wonderful teacher. Sometimes she would send a student next door, next door to superior dairies to pick up ice cream for the whole class. So that was really nice. And one time she took a few of us to her house just on the other side of the river. And that was, yeah, I remember that was a really, really nice, nice house.

Sergio Barrera 28:44

Did you have any teachers that were Mexican, American, Mexican?

Anita Quintanilla 28:51

Oh, the third the third grade, Mrs. Herrera. Third grade. Mrs. Herrera, who is now an icon in East Austin, named a school after her Mendez Elementary. I thought she was a little mean and strict, but she was really a very good teacher and so, and I don't know if she had any Mexican influence or emphasis, I don't remember that? But yeah, she was Mexican American, but the rest were white, and principal hildegram was, of course, white, but my aunt Sarah taught fourth grade, but I wasn't in her class.

Sergio Barrera 29:36

Do you know anything about the teaching that your aunt would do the teaching, yeah? Like, if he do, like, what subject did she teach? Or?

Anita Quintanilla 29:47

fourth grade? And I'm not sure what subject, that's interesting question, as if we stayed in that one class the whole time and went to subject after subject.

Sergio Barrera 29:58

So, so Did y'all? Yeah, we did. Stay

Anita Quintanilla 30:00

in one classroom, and it was all the subjects, yeah, I'm thinking of high school.

Sergio Barrera 30:06

So then your schooling was, you were assigned one teacher for the entire day,

Anita Quintanilla 30:10

yeah, for the whole year, one teacher, one classroom.

Sergio Barrera 30:17

While you were at Palm school, your aunt was teaching, yes,

Anita Quintanilla 30:21

yes. She graduated from there in the late 40s.

Sergio Barrera 30:27

How was it? Do you feel having you're the...

Anita Quintanilla 30:30

It was another, you know, of having a family relative there. So I felt like, in a way, I was at home. I was with familia. Yeah. So that helped, that helped me knowing that she was in the building.

Sergio Barrera 30:40

Did you Would you ever see her?

Anita Quintanilla 30:45

Sometimes after school, I would go to her classroom, and she would trim my bangs. But yeah, we had encounters.

Sergio Barrera 30:52

And y'all would also, I must wait first. Actually, the question, Is she your aunt from your dad's side, or your mother? Well,

Anita Quintanilla 31:00

like I said, my father had three brothers and three sisters, so she was a younger sister, Sarah King to Nia Reyes.

Sergio Barrera 31:09

And what was, Did your father have any conversations? Do your I don't know if you would know, but about, you know, hey, look out for my daughters, you know. Or was there a sense of responsibility.

Anita Quintanilla 31:21

He probably talked with her because my parents were very strict. Oh, my God, that's another story. So yeah, sometimes I lose my thought

Sergio Barrera 31:37

in terms of you said, Miss Herrera, and I want to scale back a little bit. Yes, you said, What do you remember specifically about her?

Anita Quintanilla 31:44

I remember her brown face and her seriousness and discipline, and she was, yeah, a good teacher. Yeah. I remember one time I was making this drawing, and I didn't like it, and I put this big X on it, and I showed her. Said, Oh, no, look what I did to my phone. And she said, well, make that that "x" a fence. So I made it a fence. So she was just very, very helpful.

Sergio Barrera 32:13

Creative. It's creatives like,

Anita Quintanilla 32:14

turn this into this. Oh,

Sergio Barrera 32:18

and you say that now there's a school named after her.

Anita Quintanilla 32:21

Minutes, men, yeah, do you know what was her first Well, her editor, wait a minute, herena Mendez, was her name anyway, yeah, there's a school name.

Sergio Barrera 32:36

Do you know a little bit of like, the politics that went behind that, or how that was named

Anita Quintanilla 32:40

I wasn't around. I was probably in San Francisco. I lived there for many years, and then returned to Austin in 1999 so I wasn't around, you know, the late 70s and the 80s and 90s. But I would, you know, come visit every Christmas. So I don't know there was a lot of politics in all those years.

Sergio Barrera 33:05

I know that you all didn't grow up speaking Spanish, right? Or at least it wasn't something that was encouraged. But do you remember other people maybe getting away with speaking Spanish? Or was ever there was like, these strict rules, where as soon as Spanish came out, you were gonna be punished,

Anita Quintanilla 33:21

yeah? At palm school, if they heard you speak Spanish, yeah, the paddle, yeah, that was the rule.

Sergio Barrera 33:29

Were the these actual rules, or it was more like, you do it, and this is a consequence.

Anita Quintanilla 33:34

I don't know if it was like official, but it was one of those, you know, rules, no Spanish, no Spanish.

Sergio Barrera 33:41

And did that? Do you feel like that was a constant occurrence at Palm school, yes,

Anita Quintanilla 33:44

yes, and it really had an effect on the students that spoke Spanish. I mentioned it to my best friend, Connie, and she said, Yes. You know, at Palm it was really demoralizing, and she they ended up speaking Spanglish. So half you know English and Spanish, but it was just, it was awful not being able to speak comfortably in Spanish

Sergio Barrera 34:11

And especially, I think, when your children right, you don't understand the reasoning.

Anita Quintanilla 34:15

We don't know about racism and assimilation and brainwashing and indoctrination and all that. But that's what was going on.

Sergio Barrera 34:28

I want you to take me to the out of the classroom experience. Did you all have a playground? What were the outdoors like?

Anita Quintanilla 34:37

Oh, my God, on the grounds? Was Park, palm Park. So at recess, we'd run down to palm Park and and play Mary Go Round and slides and just play around with each other and jump rope and all that, and but in the summer, palm Park had a swimming pool. So in the summer, oh man, we. Yeah, we went there all the time. But a few years earlier, in the late 40s, Mexicans were not allowed in the swimming pool. So fortunately, I was able to, you know, in the 40s, start going, Yeah, swimming during the summer.

Sergio Barrera 35:21

So the pool was connected to the park.

Anita Quintanilla 35:24

It was in the park, yeah, palm school, the building, and then palm Park and the swimming pool,

Sergio Barrera 35:32

and the pool was only accessible during the summer. Summer. Do you have any memories of any or any stories about the park, you know, during recess at your time at Palm school?

Anita Quintanilla 35:45

Well, I remember one incident. We're walking down with one of the teachers who only had, I think, four fingers, and we're holding her hand walking down to the park, and some kids were being, you know, rude or something, and she said, No, we're going back to the class. So the whole class had to suffer because a couple of students were being rowdy. I remember that we're walking down the park and had to go back to the classroom. Was like, God,

Sergio Barrera 36:13

I'm assuming everybody was like, waiting for that time to get out of the classroom, right? Oh,

Anita Quintanilla 36:18

yes, yes. And lunch time, yeah, and after school.

Sergio Barrera 36:25

Did you all play? Any you know? Were there any common games that y'all played?

Anita Quintanilla 36:32

Well there was the for the, what did I say? There are the dancing

Sergio Barrera 36:39

you've mentioned that there were some, some, like special performances, but you please tell me more

Anita Quintanilla 36:43

What was the dance? Fourth not four square. What do you call it? Anyway? I'll think of it later. But yeah, we also played, I think four square, and maybe on May 1, you know, around the May pole. Yeah, may 1,

Sergio Barrera 37:02

I think you had mentioned line den, like, was it square dancing? Line Dancing, one of those

Anita Quintanilla 37:07

Square dancing, yeah, I think you make, yeah, I got it confused with the square where, yeah, four square anyway, yeah, square dancing, which was country, very Texan. So, yeah, square dancing.

Sergio Barrera 37:17

Was this something that they taught you or you kind of, it was

Anita Quintanilla 37:21

like part of the curriculum, you know, for, you know, dancing, that

Sergio Barrera 37:31

in terms of extracurricular activities, would you remember that? Were there any clubs or organizations?

Anita Quintanilla 37:37

Oh boy, don't get me started. Well, the sixth grade was the height of my popularity. I was like, captain of the Safety Patrol, president of the Girl Scouts, etc, etc. So yeah, we had Girl Scouts and Safety Patrol, and probably reading and, Oh God, what are the others? And then, of course, the sports, which always made blue ribbons. I was the fastest runner in the whole school in the sixth grade, because, you know me and my brother, yeah, we played, and I was a tom boy, and I got teased for that, being a tom boy. Could

Sergio Barrera 38:22

you explain? How you got to be involved with the Girl Scouts?

Anita Quintanilla 38:27

I guess somebody came to the room and talked about Girl Scouts. And I thought, Oh, that's great, yeah. So we started, you know, a class, get meeting together and try to win bad badges for our uniform. One of my badges was to take care of child care. And so my aunt and my aunt el had twins, so I go over there, and, you know, was helping her with the twins, the babies. And so I wrote about it, so that I got a badge for that. But yeah, we were working on badges and meeting and yeah,

Sergio Barrera 39:06

was this a collective of girls that were doing this?

Anita Quintanilla 39:15

Yeah? Girls at Palm, a few of us,

Sergio Barrera 39:20

and you said you were at sixth grade. So was it only reserved for sixth graders?

Anita Quintanilla 39:21

I only remember Girl Scouts in the fifth grade, sixth grade. Yeah.

Sergio Barrera 39:22

Now, in terms of of the sports, were there other sports that were played, aside from from track, I think, or running you were talking about,

Anita Quintanilla 39:30

I remember us playing soccer in the front of the building, and I made all the scores, and at one point I managed to completely flip over. So I don't know how that happened, but out of the blue, they're all flipping over. So yeah, I made all the scores at soccer, and then we would have, you know, sports, you know sports day, and I was the fastest runner and did the most chin ups and other things.

Sergio Barrera 39:35

Yeah, very athletic. Then

Anita Quintanilla 40:10

When I was a pre teen, I was very athletic. Wanted to go, go to the Olympics, but, of course, it was discouraged, because I was a girl. Girls Run fast and climb trees, so I was discouraged. But, yeah, the Olympics.

Sergio Barrera 40:15

But I mean, you still, you still manage, within your school to be very active,

Anita Quintanilla 40:18

yeah, and Junior High in high school?

Sergio Barrera 40:21

Yes, so it kind of set

Anita Quintanilla 40:25

Intramurals, yes, basketball. Remember,

Sergio Barrera 40:29

Remember, would you all play or run against other schools? Or it was just amongst the palm school students?

Anita Quintanilla 40:33

Probably in high school, there was the intramurals with other schools, I'm pretty sure. But I don't remember

Sergio Barrera 40:45

we've spoken a little about, like, some of the difficult experience coming particularly with punishment, right, the shaking of the shoulders of paddling. But could you remember maybe other difficult experiences that you might have had in the classroom?

Anita Quintanilla 40:58

Well, I remember the cruelty of some of the students, like some of the students were so poor they didn't have shoes, and they come come to school barefooted. So the main kids would step on their their feet and twist and twist it. That was really terrible. And then the girls, I think, around the second or third grade, they would kick open the stall in the bathroom of when this, this fat white girl was in there that was really mean, yeah and other things, yeah, cruel, cruel kids.

Sergio Barrera 41:31

So would you say that there was equal cruelty amongst teachers and kids?

Anita Quintanilla 41:36

Well yeah, a lot of the kids were cruel. And just maybe just one or two of the teachers were impatient with their students, including my Aunt Sarah. I think she had a low tolerance for misbehavior.

Sergio Barrera 41:52

I know that you've mentioned at least two Priscilla and Connie, maybe

Anita Quintanilla 41:56

my Connie and we met up recently, and now we're best friends again, Connie and she had about 13 brothers and sisters.

Sergio Barrera 42:04

Could you tell me about your relationship with Connie?

Anita Quintanilla 42:09

Oh, boy. We were real close. And then when we went to junior high, which was on Red River, we would meet at Rainey and Red River and walk together up Red River to u, j, h, which was on 19th in Red River back then. And then we just continued to be best friends. And of course, when I lived out of Austin, we lost track. And when I went to Portland in 2019 because the the father of my children died, I ran into her and her her daughters at some event, Native American event. I couldn't believe it. We ran into each other in Portland, Oregon, so we hooked up again. That was great, because I was alone in the house, you know, trying to, you know, sell it off, sell everything and go through everything anyway, it was a hard period, because he just died, and Connie was there for me.

Sergio Barrera 43:06

So Connie was one of your classmates. Or how did you meet Connie?

Anita Quintanilla 43:10

She was one of my classmates. I remember in sixth grade, but maybe we also had other classes together fifth grade, maybe, but she lived near downtown, so she was also on the west side of ih 35 and a lot and others that lived on Rainey or an East Avenue were on the east side, I mean the west side of ih 35 back then we call it the inter, inter regional highway.

Sergio Barrera 43:39

And do you remember what? What grade level you all were both in?

Anita Quintanilla 43:44

I don't remember before fifth grade, maybe the fifth and six.

Sergio Barrera 43:48

And then, what about Priscilla? You also mentioned a Priscilla.

Anita Quintanilla 43:52

Maybe I shouldn't mention her name. Yeah, like in the third grade, we were best friends, and she was bad influence on me, but yeah, we continued to be friends throughout palm and huge age.

Sergio Barrera 44:07

So would you say that other children? How would you describe how they would treat you at Palm school?

Anita Quintanilla 44:16

Well, I was sort of, you know, popular, even though I didn't speak Spanish. Oh, yeah, some of the the meaner, the meaner girls from from East Austin, I might get get harassed for not knowing Spanish. Oh, you think you're too good. So I wasn't taught it, you know, to them, I was supposed to speak Spanish and know the Mexican culture. So I probably got some dirty looks.

Sergio Barrera 44:48

But would you describe your experience, at least with your classmates? Generally, pretty positive.

Anita Quintanilla 44:53

Oh yes, yes, yes, I remember each class when we were all getting together and there was no you. No bad words or feelings. Yeah,

Sergio Barrera 45:05

I'm curious also to you say you kind of were a popular figure. When did you realize your popularity?

Anita Quintanilla 45:12

Well in the sixth grade, my God, you know. Plus my my father was president of the PTA. My younger sister Cathy, was queen of the school, and when we had our annual event to present the kings and queens of the classes, I was the MC. And there was a little the cafeteria was packed. So that was really exciting. I remember that so vividly.

Sergio Barrera 45:40

And when you say PTA is at the Parent Teacher Association,

Anita Quintanilla 45:43

yeah, thanks for reminding Teacher Teacher Association. Yeah.

Sergio Barrera 45:50

How did your father get involved with that? Do you know?

Anita Quintanilla 46:00

Well, he was sort of involved with East Austin because he had his office there on East Sixth Street, and he talked to the community members, and I'm sure they shared their bad experiences and the problems of East Austin. And so he started develop an interest in politics and social issues. And I don't know how he became president, but he was and I really enjoyed going to the meetings and to hear my father speak to everybody.

Sergio Barrera 46:20

Did he do anything while you were at Palm school? You know, in direct that would directly affect palm school?

Anita Quintanilla 46:30

I'm sure he did at the PTE meetings. I don't remember, but hopefully, you know, with their the social issues, and probably didn't touch on racism or anything like that.

Sergio Barrera 46:44

I also wanna You said that your your sister cat was the queen of school. Yeah. How did that become?

Anita Quintanilla 46:50

Well, we would have these fundraisers in each class, and the one who made the most money, and so her class, when she was in the second grade, they made the most money, and so they won, and she was queen of the school.

Sergio Barrera 47:08

So you had it one year, and then she had it another year.

Anita Quintanilla 47:10

I was queen of just the fourth grade, and then she was queen of the school.

Sergio Barrera 47:14

Wow. Okay, so the difference is becoming the queen of of you know, you becoming the queen of fourth ways.

Anita Quintanilla 47:24

Well, first in the classroom, they would vote on who the king and queen would be in that classroom. And so then when we had our fundraisers, if that our classroom made the most money, then then I would have become queen of the school, but she shared the funds with the rest of the classes.

Sergio Barrera 47:45

So, so then your sister became queen of the school because they made the most money, and she was voted?

Anita Quintanilla 47:50

Her second grade class room made the most money. I don't know how. Maybe she was kind of popular because I was popular. Oh, there's, there's, I need his little sister, no, I'm just playi...

Sergio Barrera 48:03

And she was at school while you were also at school?

Anita Quintanilla 48:05

Yeah, there was four years. So when she was in the first grade, I was in the fourth grade or the fifth grade. Yeah, fifth grade and sixth grade. So yeah. So we shared two years at Palm together.

Sergio Barrera 48:21

We've spoken a little about, like the Fiesta that y'all would have. But could you remember any other special days or special celebrations that you all would have at Palm school?

Anita Quintanilla 48:31

Oh boy, oh boy. Well, the plays and the pageants for Christmas and Easter, I remember our field trips to Mrs. Baird's bread factory in downtown Austin. We would go each year, and after the tour, they'd give us a little little bread loaf. It was so cute. Trying to think of other field trips. Yeah, we probably made other field trips.

Sergio Barrera 49:01

In terms of this one, the Mrs. Birds. You said bread factory? Was this a yearly thing?

Anita Quintanilla 49:09

Yeah, yearly thing. The students would go in, have the tour of the factory, and then given the little loaf for bread.

Sergio Barrera 49:18

What do you remember most about, about that, aside from, from the loaf of bread, from those from rose field trips?

Anita Quintanilla 49:24

I felt like, yeah, it was like, instructional. We were learning how they make the bread in the factory. We see the factory workers and the whole process, and smelling the fresh bread and then receiving that little loaf, yeah. It was really, really nice. Yeah, we really enjoyed those trips.

Sergio Barrera 49:44

Were there any events in which the families were welcomed, aside from Fiesta?

Anita Quintanilla 49:50

Fiesta or the PTA meetings, and when we had plays and pageants to present? Yeah, the whole community would come. Yeah?

Sergio Barrera 50:00

Were you ever involved in any of those plays?

Anita Quintanilla 50:02

Oh, yes, starting when kindergarten was my first time on stage. So I was involved throughout and I continued to be involved throughout my adulthood. But yeah, with the plays and the pageants.

Sergio Barrera 50:15

Do you remember any particular story that sticks out from a pageant or play

Anita Quintanilla 50:19

one of the pageants might have been Christmas where one of the angels had a star and she had glitter all over her, and when she shake it, the glitter would just fall. I remember, I remember the glitter, and it made it, made it seem so magical.

Sergio Barrera 50:36

What about your role? Do you remember any particular role that you played that sticks out?

Anita Quintanilla 50:41

as far as performances. Gee, I don't remember Christmas... Easter.... I might remember later.

Sergio Barrera 50:53

What do you say? I mean, your father was pretty involved. But would your mother also show up to these events?

Anita Quintanilla 50:59

Oh, yeah, she would the Fiesta, she would make that fabulous fudge, and then talk with the community members. And I don't remember her going to the PT guess, you know, and she was almost blind, yeah.

Sergio Barrera 51:17

One of the questions that we're also interested is, what do you think the role of education for palm school had for you? You know, having those experiences. How did that set a foundation for you?

Anita Quintanilla 51:28

Well, in general, I don't think they were pushing all of us to have a higher, higher education and talk about college. It was just, you know, for us to learn as much as we could in each classroom. Excuse me. Wait, I'm starting to spit.

Sergio Barrera 51:44

I'll take that to

51:46

match your energy drink

Anita Quintanilla 51:52

as well. And how are my boobs? (laughs)

51:55

So far so good.

Sergio Barrera 52:09

so you say kind of that there was no push for further. Right? How do you think that that might have shaped your growing up in the education system?

Anita Quintanilla 52:18

Well, my parents were already encouraging us to learn more and more and read and read, but there was no encouragement. In fact. I mean, we mentioned this when I was in the 12th grade at Austin High School, the counselor discouraged me from going on to college just because of my last name, Quintanilla. He assumed that I didn't I wasn't smart enough, or I wasn't interested, that I was going to get married, but actually discouraged me and told me about this work study program. You just go to three classes, and then you go on hands learning some skill. God, so when I went home and I'm mentioning that to my mother, woo, she was mad. Yeah.

Sergio Barrera 53:09

Do you think, also thinking about palm school? Do you think that they prepared you for middle school, though?

Anita Quintanilla 53:15

Yeah, in the sixth grade, they were sort of preparing us for for u, j, h, university junior high, which was on the UT campus, and now there's a social work building.

Sergio Barrera 53:28

Now I want to move a little bit into maybe what you remember the palm school to be, or reflections about the palm school, right? And one of the questions that we have here is, how do you think that the palm school fit within the larger Mexican American community of Austin at that time?

Anita Quintanilla 53:43

it was very, very, very much a part of the neighborhood. We were near downtown, so the other elementary schools were further east, and they were more Mexican culture and more, probably more Mexican American teachers or Spanish speaking teachers, but yeah, since we're and when and there was only mostly Mexican Americans and then some whites, and absolutely no African Americans, even though we weren't too far from where they lived, up on 12th Street,

Sergio Barrera 54:20

what would you think that the population was kind of 50/50, between whites and Mexican American.

Anita Quintanilla 54:27

No it was like 98% Mexican American. And then one day, I think it was in the fifth or sixth grade, a teacher was going to take two white girls to a very special event. Two white girls, one of them couldn't make it, after all, and so she asked me, so I guess because I didn't speak Spanish, I was sort of white in their eyes.

Sergio Barrera 54:49

Do you remember what this event was?

Anita Quintanilla 54:52

I don't remember the event, but it was a very special event which she was going to, and she could bring two guests.

Sergio Barrera 55:02

Yeah, in terms of family choice, did your family have a choice as to where you wanted to go to school? Or were you kind of, you know, it was like, Oh, by region because you live?

Anita Quintanilla 55:14

Yeah there was no choice. No choice. All of us in the neighborhood went to palm school.

Sergio Barrera 55:20

Do you remember? Do you know of anybody who might have gone elsewhere? Or it was like by

Anita Quintanilla 55:25

I just knew the palm school students and those that lived in the neighborhood East first, Holly East Avenue, and my cousin Nancy and her parents lived on East second.

Sergio Barrera 55:42

How do you think your family your family or your neighborhood felt about palm school?

Anita Quintanilla 55:47

It was part of the it was part of the neighborhood, part of their lives, their student, their their children, and maybe they went to palm school also in the 40s. So it was part of the of the neighborhood and part of the community, yeah, so PTA meetings and other events the community was, was there.

Sergio Barrera 56:10

So it was kind of like an identity staple,

Anita Quintanilla 56:13

yes, and that was a place where the one of the only places that we would get together, besides church, and some of the students went to Salvation Army rec, rec center in Holly, which my parents never allowed us to go to, even though it was like three blocks away, because, Oh, boys were going to be there.

Sergio Barrera 56:35

So you got a sense of who lived in the neighborhood, and also who, because of who was in school and vice versa. Everybody was neighborly?

Anita Quintanilla 56:44

Yes, and go to the heb on East First Street and you'd run into Yeah, your classmates and their parents.

Sergio Barrera 57:01

How do you feel? How do you feel? People who care about palm school remember the school and the surrounding neighborhoods?

Anita Quintanilla 57:09

Well, I wasn't around the 70s, 80s. It was still part of the neighborhood, and people cherished that building, yeah, and still felt like it was part of the community, but in the 70s, they closed it down.

Sergio Barrera 57:25

What does palm school mean to you?

Anita Quintanilla 57:28

Oh, boy, it was a big, big, big part of my childhood, palm school and palm Park, big part of my childhood.

Sergio Barrera 57:38

And would you say, what does it mean on a family level to you?

Anita Quintanilla 57:42

Well, me and my siblings and cousins, we were there for maybe a range of 11 years altogether. So it was like a family place in my Aunt Sarah, so all my close friends. So it was family. I

Sergio Barrera 58:08

uh, red right now, where we were in the in the in the in the in the room Red was, was mentioning about how he was recognizing some of the the buildings, you know, maybe stores, icons,

Anita Quintanilla 58:21

yeah, like, like the green and white grocery store on the seventh, yeah.

Sergio Barrera 58:26

So do you remember of local also, maybe establishments, building, mom pop stores,

Anita Quintanilla 58:32

Yeah, the icons that they've torn down. Well, the green and white store is still there. It might be something else by now, but on on the seventh, they had the tower, and that's where the tortilla factory was, and it was like a tower, and they tore down part of it for some new restaurant, but yeah, I remember that as an icon, and see what else the church is, Guadalupe and and Ray, what's the other church? Crystal Ray, oh, Crystal Ray, we're forced to go Sunday mornings. Sometimes we walk with my mother.

Sergio Barrera 59:14

Was this because your family was very religious?

Anita Quintanilla 59:17

not very well, social and family pressure, because my father wasn't, even though his his father was a pastor, not a pastor, but Baptist preacher, whatever. He wasn't religious. And my mother wasn't particularly because, you know, she, you know, went to school in in school for the blind. And so it was just that, that peer pressure, family pressure, and if she didn't, she knew that people would say, oh, you're a bad mother.

Sergio Barrera 59:55

We have heard that there's been a history. Right, even at Palm School, where maybe some Mexican American students were not able to access a library, the pool, things like this, because of, you know, segregation. Did you ever remember maybe not having access to things?

Anita Quintanilla 1:00:16

No, because that was the late 40s when we were not allowed. And then a couple of years after that, we were allowed. So by then, yes, I was able to go to the palm school, palm Park, swimming pool, so I

don't remember that being stopped. No, you cannot go there. But students that were a few years younger than me, they had to go through that. I mean, students that were older than me, yeah,

Sergio Barrera 1:00:47

I also want you to, because you mentioned the library, right? And how important reading was to you. Could you help me envision what the library was like and what you remember?

Anita Quintanilla 1:00:57

I'm gonna say it was like a sanctuary for me to go in there and be at peace with the stories, but you mentioned something that triggered something in the sixth grade. I remember there was a special class, special ed for students that they considered to be slow, and they were kind of looked at as being retarded just because they didn't know perfect English. And I thought that was very strange, and I felt sorry for them.

Sergio Barrera 1:01:24

Did you know any of these students that were in that class?

Anita Quintanilla 1:01:27

Not close, because we weren't in that the same class? But I knew of them, and, yeah, they were treated differently, stigmatized,

Sergio Barrera 1:01:38

so they were basically

Anita Quintanilla 1:01:39

this special class

Sergio Barrera 1:01:42

so they never had contact with you all, basically,

Anita Quintanilla 1:01:45

Oh, yeah, in cafeteria and playground. But as far as going in the other classrooms, no no mixing.

Sergio Barrera 1:01:55

And these, would you say, were heavily Spanish dominant. Probably

Anita Quintanilla 1:01:59

they didn't know English real well, and they were just slow, slow at learning.

Sergio Barrera 1:02:13

Are part of the stories that have happened as to what led to the closing of palm school was because, I mean, the conditions were really, yeah,

Anita Quintanilla 1:02:21

the conditions were really bad. And they were starting to, in the 70s, just starting to be really, really hot. And there was next to ice 35 the noise, the heat, the ceilings, falling in the walls, yeah, it was in really bad condition. I think they closed it around 1976

Sergio Barrera 1:02:42

Do you remember, like having bad conditions while you were going in school? Or were they

Anita Quintanilla 1:02:48

just bad conditions when one of the students punch the punch his fist into the wall in the hallway, but as far as I remember, I didn't notice, you know, I

Sergio Barrera 1:03:04

How do you think palm school in the neighborhood helped shape you into who you are today,

Anita Quintanilla 1:03:13

to feel like I was part of the community, that I belonged I belong There at Palm school, and in that neighborhood I belonged. I was at home in that neighborhood, at the school, and it was my little world, my little world that I didn't know much. I didn't know anything about beyond it. Once a while, our father would take us. He said, Let's go catch some air, and we'd go only a few minutes would be out of the city limit in the woods, and we'd go hiking, but yeah, pretty much stayed in that little neighborhood.

Sergio Barrera 1:03:57

How do you think being an alum of palm school and the neighborhood has affected you as an adult or in your later education?

Anita Quintanilla 1:04:07

a privilege, like I went to palm School and graduated there and went on to junior high. So what was the question, yeah,

Sergio Barrera 1:04:18

so kind of, how do you feel like your later life was affected by palm school and also the neighborhood that you came to?

Anita Quintanilla 1:04:26

Well, in looking back, guess when I went to you Junior High in the seventh grade, all of a sudden I wasn't popular, and there was like, 1/3 black, 1/3 white, 1/3 Mexican American. So it was like, whoa. And then I would see white students with, you know, braces on their teeth, like whoa. So they were wealth. The wealthy whites went there. And so there was that change of seeing them how they dressed, in their behavior, and then seeing students that went to palm school, like. Oh, we were from on the east side. People are looking down on us. We were different, and that's and I started making friends, especially through sports with African American girls.

Sergio Barrera 1:05:14

But those things were not evident to you at Palm school.

Anita Quintanilla 1:05:18

Looking forward to going to another school that was going to have white kids and black kids.

Sergio Barrera 1:05:22

I mean, the fact that y'all kind of dressed similarly were from the same social working class, so that wasn't

Anita Quintanilla 1:05:30

so I went to junior high seventh grade in the white some of the white students were dressing real nice, nice shoes and the hair and the braces, and when they went to, went to the school, they weren't coming from the east side. They were coming from the west side.

Sergio Barrera 1:05:53

So that was a cultural mesh. Basically, that was happening

Anita Quintanilla 1:05:55

culture clash known in junior high. Was it junior high I ran for? Was it high school? I ran for cheerleader? Oh yeah, ujj, I ran for cheerleader, and I was the only Mexican American running, and I would have won, but some of the Mexican American girls were jealous of me because I was popular and I guess pretty, and the boys liked me so and I was on the west side of I 35 so they didn't like me, and they were mean to me. So if they had voted for me, I would have won as cheer leader at UJJ,

Sergio Barrera 1:06:40

that is the middle school,

Anita Quintanilla 1:06:43

UJJ, middle school. University, junior high on the UT campus. And so, yeah, they were a little mean to me in junior high because I still didn't know Spanish and the Mexican culture very well.

Sergio Barrera 1:07:03

So I mean, not to make it about myself, but I can, I mean K through 12. Now Elementary is till fifth grade. And you know,

Anita Quintanilla 1:07:11

back then, Elementary was first through six and junior high, which I guess I call Middle School, 7, 8, ninth, then high school, 10, 11, 12. That's the way it was back then. Whoops.

Sergio Barrera 1:07:32

So you go to UJJ, and then you're the high school. You said that it was Austin High School.

Anita Quintanilla 1:07:36

Austin High School in West Austin. So there were a lot of very wealthy white people. I was the school with the mayor's daughter, the governor's daughter, Sharon Conley, who wasn't very friendly, kind of

stuck up anyway. So yeah, and with lamb's daughters, you know, lamb's candy. Yeah, all the wealthy whites were at Austin High School, and it was maybe the number one high school in Texas.

Sergio Barrera 1:08:13

when you think back of your time at you know, in K through 12, what were some of your biggest accomplishments, or your highlights?

Anita Quintanilla 1:08:29

Woooo, the plays and the sports, playing basketball and in high school, we would have play the other schools would come in, and we would have the plays from other schools. And that was a big event when we watch, yeah, the performance performances of other schools to see how they performed and their themes,

Sergio Barrera 1:08:57

and in terms of, like, your personal accomplishments, what do you think are some of

Anita Quintanilla 1:09:02

those my perfect attendance and a fast runner, and people saw me as intelligent and friendly and pretty.

Sergio Barrera 1:09:15

When you think of the palm school being a symbol, what does it symbolize to you?

Anita Quintanilla 1:09:24

It symbols East Austin, a big, big part of East Austin, even though it's just west of ice 35 it was still, back then it was considered East Austin. I always say, you know, I'm from East Austin, even though Rainey Street is on the west side, because they say oh east of ice, 35 and oh 78702, or 78701, anyway,

Sergio Barrera 1:09:52

so it's, it definitely means kind of a traditional Austin

Anita Quintanilla 1:09:57

that was east. East Austin, at least that part of East Austin. And then further east were other other elementary schools. And to me that going further east was like, Wow, way, way, way far away for me, to me, but we did go all to Crystal, gray. Crystal, way gray. Was she calling?

Sergio Barrera 1:10:22

I'm also interested in, I would call you an activist.

Anita Quintanilla 1:10:25

Oh, yes.

Sergio Barrera 1:10:30

So I'm interested in your activism as a member of the community and as a member of you know, being former palm school, what does that activism mean to you now?

Anita Quintanilla 1:10:41

Well, that didn't start until I went to UT in 1968 and I hung around with the Chicanos and the club mayo, Mexican American youth organization, and they were very aware of all the social problems, and I was starting to become politicized and empowered. One time I was in the cafeteria on the campus here on Yeah, on the campus here we're on UT. One time I was complaining to this heavy duty Chicano about the boat races on the river. It's so noisy and the traffic and and he didn't, and he said, "Well, why don't you do something about it?" Light went off in my head. You mean, I can actually do something about these social problems and not just accept them? And he said "well, that's that's the way life is. That's way it is." So, yeah, within at UT, from 1968 for a few years, involved with mayo, which also was involved with East Austin and their problems of, you know, police vote, police brutality and the racism and all that. So I was like, whoa. This is East Austin. I'm starting to open my eyes to the way it was all those years that I was there, I wasn't conscious, conscious of it, fully aware of it, but then looking back, so Wow, yeah, they're right.

Sergio Barrera 1:12:16

So your activism springs from there. Where does your activism for like advocating for palm school and advocating for remembering this history, this legacy? Where does that come from?

Anita Quintanilla 1:12:29

Well, when I returned to Austin, 1999 first, I was busy still raising my two small children, but then I started getting involved with the community and getting to know the people and their discussions. And so that started, you know, becoming empowered or politicized about East Austin, that the problems were still going on into the new century. So I was learning, you know, all that and go and went to the city hall for their meetings. They're trying to advocate for the zone to change. From, we were just there was a few Heavy Duty community activists in the late 1990s and early 2000 that wanted them to not change the code from residential to business, but they listened to the people that wanted it changed, and so it was changed the business, and that opened up the flood gates for outsiders. The business was to come in and start gentrifying it, yeah, so in 2001 that's when the gentrification really started. Hard.

Sergio Barrera 1:13:44

Yeah, I've seen, I've seen, I've heard from people like yourself say, you know, Austin has changed a lot. And I think projects like this are about remembrance, right? And about thinking, how is it that we're going to preserve this history? And

Anita Quintanilla 1:13:59

well, it's too late for my rainy street, my rainy street block completely level. Not one little grain of grass was left, and now there's several condos next to the river.

Sergio Barrera 1:14:13

So I the question that I kind of want to pose is, how important do you feel like remembering, honoring palm school as a fabric of Austin's history? How big is that for you?

Anita Quintanilla 1:14:28

Very, very big. Because I really want all these new people and tourists to know the history of it. They're walking on rainy street. Oh, all these nice nightclubs. Only you knew that in the 40s and 50s, was all Mexican Americans working in Del you know, I wanted, I want people to know the history, not to lay a guilt, guilt trip on them, but I just want them to be educated to know the history. It's like building a resort over a Native American genocide. You know, it's like. You only knew what happened here before on the grounds, so it's very important for not only East Austin residents, but the new people and tours. So now I want palm school. I was on the palm School advisory board in 2018-2019 and we're working towards how to save and preserve the palm building. And so that's what I was thinking. I was telling them, it'd be great. It was if it was like a Mexican museum, archives, where people walked in, whether it be East Austin residents, or tours. You when you walk into the building, it's like walking into the 1950s and you see all the black and white photos and material, and, yeah, I want them. I want it to be like a mix and museum, and then, of course, they'll have classrooms and other things. We're still working on that.

Sergio Barrera 1:16:01

So is that your hopes for the physical structure?

Anita Quintanilla 1:16:05

I hope so. They tore down all our other icons, all our Mexican restaurants. They had the moral obligation, after they treated us all these years decades, the moral obligation to at least save that one building and give it to us.

Sergio Barrera 1:16:29

Before I ask the final question, which is kind of about you, I want to I want to open it up to see what are the things would you want to touch upon that I haven't about growing up in Rainey street, about palm school.

Anita Quintanilla 1:16:43

Well, quickly, because you mentioned my activism at UT, we start. We were part of the UFW boycott, lettuce and grapes. Gallo one. Well, not the wine, but in the cafeteria, we had a like a boycott, and that was successful. I was telling people, don't go in there because they don't have UFW lettuce. And then that started my activism. And then I ended up in New York City, and that's where I heard Doris Huerta speak what a powerful speech. And so I joined the UFW staff there in New York City. And then we all went to California in 1976 to work on a proposition for the farm workers, for them to to fund the agricultural Labor Relations Board. And then I was organizing farm workers and learning more Spanish. And then Cesar Chavez approached me, and he asked me to be his bodyguard, his first female. He was a feminist, so he felt it was time to have a female bodyguard. And so I was alone in the conference room, doing some paperwork, and he came in and he, he asked me, there I was face to face with Cesar Chavez. I was already working in that that building, and so gonna turn down Cesar Chavez. So

then I, then I moved when I moved up to San Francisco in 1976 it continued. There was so much going on in San Francisco, lot of movements. So really got involved there. And it continued and continued.

Sergio Barrera 1:18:15

And then you kind of brought that right to Austin, when you, when you came back here, yeah,

Anita Quintanilla 1:18:19

and got got to knew the I got to know the new, not the new, but the old school guards here in East Austin, what had been going on all this time. So being involved with them and communicating with them, it started again with the activism. And like I said, I wrote lots of letters to the editor about gentrification east in East Austin, and I've written about palm school and Rainey.

Sergio Barrera 1:18:48

And as you were speaking, I remember I have two questions. The first that I want to ask is how I don't know that everybody else has a member that's also participating in this project. But what does it mean to you to be not only speaking about your story, but you know you have two other sisters that are in this project.

Anita Quintanilla 1:19:08

My younger sister is going to be interviewed tomorrow, Sunday, and my older sister Linda is going to help with the photos and the voice over. And then, yeah, my aunt was at Palm and my cousins, so yeah, but yeah, it's like, wow, it's a family affair. And it's kind of like, wow, makes us feel the Quintanillas, making us feel really special,

Sergio Barrera 1:19:36

yeah? I mean, when I saw I'm like, this is there? It's a family matter, and to me, I think it's important, because you're doing this with your sisters. This

Anita Quintanilla 1:19:46

with my sister today, and then tomorrow my both sisters.

Sergio Barrera 1:19:50

So it adds another level, right? Yeah, even though they

Anita Quintanilla 1:19:53

didn't notify my younger sister until like, two days ago, but she loves to talk, so this will be easy peasy. Yeah,

Sergio Barrera 1:20:01

the last question that I have for you is, after all these experiences of activism, of being in Palm school, of traveling, of being, you know, with Cesar Chavez, who do you think that Anita Quintanilla is now

Anita Quintanilla 1:20:19

from the very timid little country girl from Rainey street just slowly becoming not so shy, performing on stage and reading poetry and becoming more and more aware of racism and the differences From East Austin and the wealthy whites in West Austin. And just slowly, my like that first book I read first grade, my horizons were becoming wider and wider, and I was seeing the world beyond my little palm school neighborhood. And what was the question again, because I was going to finish,

Sergio Barrera 1:21:01

yeah. So who has Anita Quintanilla become? Oh, okay, so

Anita Quintanilla 1:21:06

Oh okay so, starting at UT in 1968 69 I started becoming empowered and politicized and took on the term chicano, because before that, they refer to us as Spanish speakers, which I didn't know Spanish, so I didn't feel like I was a Spanish speaker, Latin, Latin American. Like, what's that? Oh, I was Chicano. I was so happy to finally have an identity, because Chicanos, we also identify as Native Americans. That's very, very big Native American spirituality.

Sergio Barrera 1:21:47

You got me emotional. So I just want to thank you so much for everything you've shared. And part of oral histories for me, is very healing. So I hope that this has given you an opportunity to express yourself and to know that we're very thankful for everything you've done,

Anita Quintanilla 1:22:06

and I'm so glad and privileged that that I was chosen for this, that y'all thought of me little ole Anita Quintanilla.