

California State Archives
State Government Oral History Program

Oral History Interview

with

Hon. Richard Polanco

Member of the California State Senate from the 22nd District, 1994–2002
Member of the California State Assembly from the 45th District, 1992–1994
Member of the California State Assembly from the 55th District, 1986–1992

May 18 and 26, 2021
All interviews conducted online

By Shanna Farrell
Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

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Richard Polanco at Lincoln Heights head-quarters, April 9, 1986

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PREFACE

The California State Government Oral History Program was created in 1985 with the passage of AB 2105. Charged with preserving the state's executive and legislative history, the Program conducts oral history interviews with individuals who played significant roles in California state government, including members of the legislature and constitutional officers, agency and department heads, and others involved in shaping public policy. The State Archives oversees and directs the Program's operation, with interviewees selected by an advisory council and the interviews conducted by university-based oral history programs. Over the decades, this collective effort has resulted in hundreds of oral history interviews that document the history of the state's executive and legislative branches, and enhance our understanding of public policy in California. The recordings and finished transcripts of these interviews are housed at the State Archives.

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Hour 2

40

Memories of Cesar Chavez — Reflections on supporting SB 984 — Elementary school and citizen education programs bill — Reasons for supporting California voting act in 2001 — Work with Native American community — Thoughts on vetoed bills — Meeting with Honorable John Burton about president pro tempore position — Conversation with governor about health director appointment — Recommendation of friend Honorable Fred Fujioka for judgeship — Memories of September 11, 2001 — Decision to not run for city council re-election in 2002 — Creation of fellows program under Latino Caucus Institute nonprofit — Reflections on political legacy — Thoughts on the Latino Caucus — Advice for young politicians

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Interviewer

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Editing

The interviewer reviewed the verbatim transcript of the interview; edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling; verified proper names; titles, and dates.

Narrator Richard Polanco was sent the edited transcript for approval and returned it with only minor corrections. Interviewer prepared the introductory materials.

Interview Records

The recordings and finished transcripts of the interviews are in The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Records relating to the interview are available through the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library. Master audio and video recordings are deposited in the California State Archives.

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

Senator Richard Polanco was born on March 4, 1951 in East Los Angeles. He joined the Optimist Club in elementary school, was active in Teen Post, and was class president when he attended James A. Garfield High School in Los Angeles. His political awareness started to develop in high school and he got involved with the United Farm Workers when he attended community college. He worked in Los Angeles County Supervisor Ed Edelman's office as a deputy, Arroyo Vista Family Health Center, and attended University of Redlands before first running for California State Assembly in 1986, where he served for eight years. He was elected to the California State Senate in 1994 and served as Senate Majority Leader from 1998 to 2002, when he retired. In this interview, Senator Polanco discusses his early life, family, education, early involvement in politics, community work, career leading up to his political campaigns, serving in both the state assembly and senate, his legislative priorities and committee work, legislation to address the AIDS epidemic, serving as the Latino Caucus chair, working with Cesar Chavez, support of Senate Bill 984, memories of September 11, 2001, decision not to run for re-election in 2002, and his creation of the fellows program under the Latino Caucus Institute.

Interview 1: May 18, 2021

01-00:00:07

Farrell:

Okay, this is Shanna Farrell with Senator Richard Polanco on Tuesday, May 18, 2021, and this is an interview for the California State Government Oral History Project, and we are talking over Zoom. Senator Polanco, thank you so much for joining me today; I'm really happy to be able to sit down and talk about your life and your career. I'm wondering if you could start by telling me when and where you were born and a little bit about your early life?

01-00:00:33

Polanco:

I was born in LA, East LA, born March fourth. I turned seventy-two this year. I grew up in the East Los Angeles—unincorporated East Los Angeles area, not to be confused with Boyle Heights or Northeast—unincorporated East LA. I grew up on what was then Brooklyn Avenue and Kern. Our house was located adjacent to an alley. There were my brothers and sisters. I come from a family of eight. My parents moved to the next street over, which is Arizona; they purchased their very first two houses on the lot. Growing up in East LA back then, a lot different than what it is today. Family size, between five and six was the average family size. Doors were left [unlocked]; when the lights went on, it was time to go inside, but it was still very safe. The community I grew up in was plagued with a lot of poverty. It was a community that had its serious education issues. When I graduated from high school, the dropout rate was 52 percent.

01-00:02:12

My dad is worked two jobs. My dad was born in Texas; he came to California. And my mom, basically a full-time mom but also worked part-time for a short period of time plucking chickens. Back then on First Street, there were poultries, and she worked there and then stopped working, had a knee slip and fall and prevented her from working. But my mother was the foundation of the family. Not only did we have my brothers and sisters, my mother opened her doors to our two cousins who, through a bitter divorce, decided to come and live with us until they graduated from high school. So here we are in a two-bedroom house with four sets of bunks, and my mother is just doing every day from five o'clock in the morning, the breakfast, and the preparation of the lunches to dinner and the washing and everything that goes on in managing the family.

01-00:03:31

My dad held two jobs, tough jobs. One was a foundry worker, the other was in the baking. My father was a baker at FOIX Bakery. Their specialty was French rolls for purposes of restaurants being the delivery points. I remember him taking me to his work one summer when I was very young, and it was summer. The closer I came to his work location, the louder this noise of just what ends up being these huge burners that melted, and it was his way of telling me, I believe, you don't want to do this, this is what this is about.

01-00:04:32

My father would come [home] covered with white, the salt that he had lost. Many a nights, I could hear the pain of this legs and body cramping as a result of not being hydrated, a lot of dehydration occur in there and loss of salt, but never missed a day's work. The weekends were very difficult because my dad was a heavy drinker on weekends, and it was not the most pleasant times. But having said that, we were really never out of food. We had our tennis shoes and at times insert cardboard or fold newspaper for a period of time, a lot of hand-me-downs. We had a secondhand store right across the street that we visited. The local stores were really very caring and sensitive in that they provided a lot of credit. If you didn't have it, they provided credit. Those were difficult times back, but they're not as visible because it's just the way of life.

01-00:06:20

Growing up, I went to Brooklyn Elementary School, great memories of my elementary experience. We had a playground director Mr. Alex Orozco, and Mr. Orozco was reactive with the Optimist Club, and Mr. Orozco established a Junior Optimist Club right on the schoolgrounds. He would organize these seasonal sports. By that I mean when football season was here, we had football teams, we had American League, National League, and trophies would be given to everybody. I remember my first trophy, I think it was 1959 or '60, about two inches with, you know?

01-00:07:11

But what I remember of him why he had such an impact was not only was he organizing the sports, but from there came the teamwork, the respect, leadership skills when he established the Junior Optimist Club. It was really my first opportunity as president of the Optimist Club to begin to understand what it is to be in a leadership role. That playground would open from three till about eight o'clock at night, and it was a playground with huge lights and there was and it was safe haven. When eight o'clock, you knew that it was time to go, When five o'clock came, you knew that it was time to go home and have dinner and then might be able to come back. But his impact to the kids there, he would say if he kicked you out, off the playground. He would say, "I'm kicking you out of here, you want to come back, you bring you mother, and I'll tell her what you did." [laughter] He knew exactly how to play it. Not only for me personally, that I see a very caring man, a man who went beyond just checkerboards or crayons. He really gave of himself to thousands of kids who graduated from Brooklyn Elementary School.

01-00:09:00

Griffith Junior High School was like another phase of change for me because now rather than staying in one particular room during elementary, now it's like you're moving every forty-five minutes, and I thought that was like really cool, and you had a locker. At that point in my junior high school because I was athletically inclined and because I participated in a lot of the junior high sports activity, I also brought this, the leadership and so student government was a role that I began to play in. I look back at a couple of the photos, and,

well, I noticed they were all women. My friend who did his thesis asked a very interesting question. His thesis was we grew up in East LA, predominantly Catholic community, but we were Protestants. We were the only halleluiahs, as we would say, on our block. His whole thesis was he was looking at all these community leaders like Senator Torres, myself, and others who were brought up in a different religion but who were influenced by women.

01-00:10:41

I look back to that original question, and obviously my mother plays a huge role. The pastor of our church was a woman way back when, and the leadership that stepped up in junior high and in high school were young women, young girls. I became comfortable coming from a culture of machismo, of male domination and I carried it out into my political career in terms of the people that I supported for public office, and maybe we'll save that. Let me stay with still the early part of my experience at Griffith.

01-00:11:40

Griffith, I will never forget the day that it was announced that Kennedy had been shot. President Kennedy had been shot. We were outside. Other big influential moments and events for me at the time, the Cuban Crisis, that was like wow. All the brutality and prejudice that was now on TV, all of that not knowing in the moment have had a big impact. Graduating on to high school, I enjoyed my three years. I was very popular. I stick out in basketball. I lettered three years varsity basketball. I held two records that have not been broken to date. Back then, it was a time again for me to excel and learn that basketball is more than just the game of basketball. My position was point guard, so you brought the ball down to court, you created the plays and so it was creating the outcomes and creating the opportunities for others and doing it in a very teamwork fashion. I was about five-seven, much lighter in weight, and I was able to excel. When you're in high school and you're able to do that, obviously, people are friendlier, more accepting.

01-00:13:49

Back then we also had the low riders. I had a '65 Chevy, black Impala. My dad was very interesting. He said, "Look, I'll get you"—and he got each of his sons their first car—"but you have to make the payment and service it. Cruising Whittier Boulevard was very popular, and back then, it was also dangerous from several ends—obviously the competition and the rivalries that existed but also the brutality that I experienced and many experienced from the sheriff's department. Being stopped in your car, being searched three times in one night, there was just a lot of insensitivity growing up from law enforcement.

01-00:14:52

Personally, I'll remember my mother who was five foot in Brooklyn, broken English. We had a sheriff wanting to come on to her property, and lo and behold, she stood her ground, "No, you can't, this is my property, what do you

want?" In retrospect, I can understand law enforcement perspective because you have on the average four or five male in a series of families and you gather outside, well back then, they thought that there was something going on. My mother just held her ground until a supervisor sheriff came and basically apologized. The worst part about it is that he was Hispanic, I mean I don't know, his partner was not. Anyway, there was a lot of brutality that occurred. We had three hangings at the local jail, one of a high school friend who was a superstar quarterback. His brother was a highway patrol officer, eventually leaves the department. But in one year to have that kind of death occur at your local East LA sheriff station just raised a lot of concern. When I look at how I legislate, I bring a lot of that experience to the table. If there's any time you want to ask me a question, feel free.

01-00:16:46

Farrell:

Yeah. There's so much information there. I have questions about a lot of things that you just said, and I think it's great to hear all this. I do want to back up a little bit and ask what your parents' names were.

01-00:17:01

Polanco:

Okay. My mother Maria Garcia Polanco, my father Lorenzo Polanco.

01-00:17:14

Farrell:

Can you tell me your siblings' names and some of your early memories of them, too?

01-00:17:19

Polanco:

Sure. My oldest sister Gloria, she is from a relationship my father [prior to getting married to my mom]. My brother Carlos, he's second in line, he is from a relationship my mother had [prior to getting married to my dad]. And Lorenzo Jr. Johnny, Danny, Henry, and Rosemary, our parents are Lorenzo and Maria. My sister Gloria was just amazing. She tells the stories of my dad. She went to live with my father as a little girl and so she tells the stories of him teaching her how to drive at fourteen years of age. Because of that affection and love, she was the one who really was able to simmer him down when the drinking got out of hand. She shares the story of with my dad's mom, my grandmother and his brothers and sisters would sit at the table for dinner, and they would wait until my father arrived home from work. He was working at the age of sixteen providing for his siblings and so my dad had a real strong ethic for work and being responsible, and he took on early.

01-00:19:19

My brother Carlos, the first to go to trade tech, went to Vietnam, came back different but healthy but with mental—I mean it just changes your life. I remember I'm the person in the family that would write the letters to him. It's amazing how their—our neighbor, a couple of houses away who is also in the service end up at the same location in Vietnam and both come back. Carlos loved to play the guitar and played the guitar at church. He was charismatic, and I enjoyed singing, so I sang in church. Carlos said to me one day—he was

working part-time at UPS, and he said, "When you letter, I'll buy you your sweater." I have my letterman sweater to this day with my three stripes and a basketball with a star. I've got to mention that he was a real cheerleader, my brother Carlos. He came back, became a journeyman in sheet metal and married. When he got back, he married his girlfriend, Margo.

01-00:21:10

Lorenzo, my brother is—I'm real proud of him because he was really challenged. My brother and I went to the same elementary and junior high and high school, and my brother dropped out. But during the time that he was at Griffith and at Garfield, the limited amount of time at Garfield High School, he never really mastered reading and writing and created his own way of measuring his life and manhood in different ways. But for the grace of God, he got his girlfriend pregnant, and that changed his life. My dad got him his first job at a bakery. Fast-forward, they've been married fifty years. Fast-forward, as his kids grew, obviously he was challenged to read and learn to write, he ends up managing and being the mechanical engineer at Certified Grocers, which is a huge independent in the baking division. I'll never forget, he was so mechanically inclined. The hydraulics that go in cars, he was putting them and installing them in my mother's carport and earning several hundred bucks, and it was just incredible. So happy that this outcome is where it ended up because my brother growing up where we grew up, a lot of gang activity, was stabbed, and has like a whole track. We almost lost him as a result. Our family, we experienced a drive-by with our front window blown out. I lost four friends who never reached their seventeenth birthday, so it was difficult.

01-00:23:49

Farrell:

Yeah, and we'll get to some of that in a little bit. I'm wondering, so you mentioned one of your dad's jobs was a baker and that your mom was also the foundation of the family and spent a lot of time taking care of everyone. I'm curious about some of your sensory memories from growing up, like what were some of the smells or the meals that you would eat?

01-00:24:15

Polanco:

I love the summers. We all loved the summers because we go to the Plunge as we called it, Belvedere Park Plunge, ten cents, go in, swim till four o'clock, start walking back home through the housing projects, and the aroma of tortillas, flour tortillas was everywhere come dinner. When we got home, it was flour tortilla with butter and so the aroma of the incredible foods that were being cooked. We had a Cuban family that lived nearby, several houses, but I remember the smell.

01-00:25:09

I also remember Fridays. I didn't like Fridays because Friday was going to be fish day. The fish guy would come around with the big drum and then smack the fish on the newspaper and bring it. But it was always with the skeleton, I mean the *spinás* as we called them, right, and so Fridays were not always

good. I also had a dislike for rice and so I put my rice in my pocket. One day, I got up, and obviously the evidence was showing, and I stopped doing that obviously.

01-00:25:53

It was very smoggy, oh, our health. There were times when you couldn't even go out, you couldn't see the mountains that, you know, really bad, really bad. Also, the stench of unincorporated East LA between the City of Commerce and Vernon, that's the largest industrial belt west of the Mississippi. Back when we're growing up, all the slaughterhouses and all the odor and the stench would come with the winds that would bring it, and it would just be horrible smell.

01-00:26:42

We also enjoyed the Helms truck that came around, and I remember the Good Humor ice cream trucks coming around. It's amazing how many potatoes and ground beef and how many different kinds of dishes my mother was able to pull up and put together. Christmas, we always had a Christmas tree. As we got older and we were in high school, my mother instilled in us, one, you leave your room clean and so all four bunks were always made. Two, we started to iron our own clothes, and I remember back then khaki, the khaki pants that you have them today, but back then, you would starch them with a pleat. My brother Lorenzo would starch them like they can stand up themselves [laughs] and so he couldn't walk. The summers were great but for the smog when you couldn't—and that was just not just summer, I mean that was like all year round some of those.

01-00:28:23

I remember the construction of the freeways that occurred and all the displacement of folks and housing and how Belvedere Park was cut in half. And how in the intersection right in the heart of East LA, you can go just about anywhere from that point across the United States, you go north, you can go south to—it leads you just everywhere. I also remember our—I'm sorry let me stop there on the smells.

01-00:29:05

But I do want to mention my brother John who comes after me. He passed away unfortunately. He served in the service, a funny guy. He was really my Archie Bunker of the family. [laughs] Worked for Edison when he came out of the navy and was there for I think thirty years or something to that effect. He died in his sleep of a massive heart attack very young. Then Danny, my brother Danny also went to work for baking company, became the secretary treasurer of the union for all the confectionary workers. Danny then there was Henry. Henry, a good football star, a good athletic star, a big cry baby when he was growing up. He used to make us laugh because he would get so angry and shake, and he would throw water on him just to break him out of it and then my sister Rosemary. With my sister Rosemary, when she was growing up, she was surrounded by boys, so it was like she'll challenge anybody, any

boy. Brooklyn Avenue, the stores that were located across the street, and one day she followed us, and she was hit by a car, and she developed seizures as a result, and I carried guilt for a long time—but she's doing well. The seizure is because of the medication and the treatments. As she grew older, they became more manageable, yeah, yeah. And that's the list of the siblings.

01-00:31:15

Farrell:

Thank you for sharing all of that, and I'm glad that your sister's seizures have also gotten more manageable as time has passed, too. You had mentioned that you were in the Optimist Club, and I'm not familiar with what that is. Could you explain what the Optimist Club is?

01-00:31:33

Polanco:

Sure, they are equivalent to the Lions Club. They're a civic organization, they're nonprofits, and so Optimist meaning optimism and so they are the equivalent of. They're a civic, nonprofit organization that do community work and support community projects such as buying all the uniforms for baseball season and the flags or football season and the jerseys for basketball season. Yeah, all of that was part of their donation.

01-00:32:11

Farrell:

Okay, and so was that your first experience working in a civic-minded organization?

01-00:32:18

Polanco:

Yes. I remember in this little bungalow that stored all the supplies that Mr. Orozco had, and I called the meetings to order, read the minutes, and it was just parliamentary kind of stuff. That was the training ground if you will, the foundation, that I would end up continuing in that particular role.

01-00:32:44

Farrell:

Yeah, so it sounds like a pretty formative experience along with sports and student government. I can imagine that given all that's going on, like you mentioned the dropout rate was 52 percent and given stuff going on in the neighborhood, and even with being routinely stopped and searched and things, that these activities in high school and middle school are kind of rooting you to yourself and the larger picture. I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit of the significance of being involved in both sports and student government and maybe what some of the things you did in student government were?

01-00:33:27

Polanco:

Before we go there, let me also share that back then, the war on poverty was funding community projects. One of the programs they funded was called Teen Post. Teen Post was for teenagers to be developed or to help and assist in developing leadership skills. There were these Teen Posts throughout LA County, and these Teen Posts they formed a governing body, and it was structured very much like our legislature. These Teen Posts became youth centers to come, plan your activities, govern. They were so successful that

members of rival gangs would come, and they knew this was off limits, nothing happens here. It was a means of also combatting and creating. My first experience to the beach came as a result of Teen Post. Teen Post played another role because I became an equivalent to a senator representing a region of Teen Posts.

01-00:34:51

Again, to your question, when I reached high school, there wasn't a lot of real opportunity to create and do stuff at a high school. It was pretty managed. As president of the class, we participated more so in that than the student government. The president of the class was able to put together your coming out, your homecoming. I mean there was more planning and activity of that sort and so participated more doing the coming-out play if you will. We did *Don Quixote* and helped write lyrics to a Supreme song, just manipulating and changing but making it more relevant to our graduation ceremony. That there was not a lot of leadership role per se in student government, I had more as a Teen Post as we were really planning excursions, fundraising, car washes, having council meetings among the teen and so, yeah, it was more restrictive. I was able to gain more, not to say that I didn't value that. I mean I valued the high school experience. My three years there were phenomenal. I really enjoyed and so yes. I think I answered.

01-00:36:51

Farrell:

Yeah, absolutely. So you're taking the opportunities where you can find them because they were limited and things like that. We've talked a little bit about some of the local issues that were going on, but you did mention you remember the Kennedy assassination and the Cuban Missile Crisis. What was your knowledge of some these larger national issues that were going on? Did you have a sense of the political climate at that point?

01-00:37:19

Polanco:

The Cuban Crisis was so dangerous. I mean we all sat, I remember, in our living room watching this and what it meant. And remember, my generation is now coming from the Vietnam War, the Korean War, one and two, and as kids, we used to play army, we used to be soldiers, pretend to be soldiers. This was being talked about as the next potential world war and so that wasn't hard to comprehend and what it meant and then close-up of the ships and the blockade, and it was just a constant, on the news. I don't remember we talked about so much in high school or in junior high school, but certainly, the Kennedy was, we knew he's president, we knew he's the first Catholic president, he was young, and then his brother, followed by his brother, my goodness, and Martin Luther King, and it was just like, oh, my goodness. I come from a generation that question government. We were suspect of government. I come from a generation in my experience where you or I experienced what government can do with resources and what government can do to harm people. It was a poignant time where to me, government could make a difference in people's lives.

01-00:39:28

Farrell:

I think that's a great point that you're making that all this stuff is happening. You're coming from a generation that's questioning the government, but you also are able to see the flip side and what's possible. I'm also wondering because growing up in LA and this is around the time that Cesar Chavez was really active, were you aware of who he was when you were in high school?

01-00:39:56

Polanco:

Sure, absolutely, I was aware. I was not actively involved at that moment in time but was aware of Cesar, was aware of the boycotts, his intentions, the struggles. When I left high school and went to college at East LA community college by then, Teatro Campesino, which was a theater composed with messages and the acting out of the farmworker life and struggle, I had the opportunity to do my first action, if you will, where back then, Lucky markets were in existence. There was one on Lorena and Brooklyn. I got there leafletting in the morning, and by 12:00 noon, that entire parking lot was vacant. My message was hand them a flyer, let them know that Cesar Chavez is asking them not to shop here, to go elsewhere, and to support the United Farm Workers, and the only cars left were the employees' cars.

01-00:41:25

Farrell:

That's significant.

01-00:41:28

Polanco:

When I ran in '86 and maybe I'm jumping, getting ahead of myself, but back then, the United Farm Workers, Cesar Chavez, Helen, Dolores with about a hundred farmworkers came for a week to come and canvass for me. Prior to my experience of the inner workings of the farmworkers, I had the opportunity to work on a campaign that Leroy Chatfield, Marshall Ganz, and Jessica Govea managed for Esteban Torres who went on to become congressmen and ambassador. Those three had been way back—and this was in the '70s, and I was coordinating southeast cities for Esteban. That was my first experience of three individuals who were Cesar's confidantes. The relationship that Esteban had with Cesar was a brotherhood if you will and so yes to the farmworkers. Unbeknownst to me that they implemented the house-meeting approach where you invite your neighbors. When I was organizing in the Maravilla NDP program, that's exactly what we were doing. We would host these meetings three times a day, seniors, and lunch, but I think I'm jumping ahead.

01-00:43:32

Farrell:

That's okay. I feel like you're giving me lots of breadcrumbs for things to ask about, so this is great.

01-00:43:37

Polanco:

Okay.

01-00:43:38

Farrell: I'm also wondering if you were aware of the 1968 student walkouts that were led by Sal Castro?

01-00:43:46

Polanco: Absolutely.

01-00:43:48

Farrell: What was your [experience with the walkouts]?

01-00:43:49

Polanco: I walked out. I was not a leader among the students, but I did walk out. I supported them, I believed in them. I got a little lecture from my coach, basketball coach, what was I doing, yada yada. I think his intention was good, but what was being asked for was extremely relevant—more teachers that look like us, more relevancy in the history to the cafeteria food. Sal Castro is a true hero. He led along with others who were part of that period of time with the walkouts.

01-00:44:50

The Chicano Moratorium, I remember walking, participating. I remember walking through the tunnel on Whittier Boulevard in East LA and just the enormous pride of seeing all this unity and the echoing that comes from being in the tunnel of Chicano power was just captivating. You look back, and you see thousands, thousands of people marching. And then to go to Laguna Park as it was called back then and be there and see what the sheriffs and the police did in terms of inciting that riot, it was an incredible experience that to this day I'm glad I was there. I'm saddened that people lost their lives. Ruben Salazar, I think that that was a deliberate, calculated assassination of someone who was in a position of power, who was in a position of power with a lot of ink to print. There were those who said enough is enough, and to have a projectile at shoulder with a coroner saying, "Hey, he died at the hands of another." My experience of dealing with law enforcement is you know that law enforcement maybe jaded to some degree because I know there are at times where, hey, you deserve to get your bucket. I mean there are times.

01-00:46:48

Farrell: How did that impact your desire to be involved in these actions?

01-00:46:56

Polanco: Well, it inspired me. It inspired me, I had to be careful because my mother would be watching all of this on TV and be calling everybody who participated communists [laughs]. But no, the walkouts, the Chicano Moratorium, those were very inspirational events that had some tragedy in it. But nevertheless, they are the foundation of what we have asked for, for years, and now eventually for example, ethnic studies becoming law, and now years, decades, it's happening. Just a point on that, I think it's so important because when you're not teaching the contributions of all different ethnic groups, you're creating a vacuum of ignorance, of lack of knowledge. I mean it's taken

this long. It's taken this long to actually now implement it in our universities and then in the educational system.

01-00:48:22

Farrell: And we're at a loss if we don't learn that history.

01-00:48:25

Polanco: Absolutely, absolutely. California is what it is because of the Native Americans. Very early, this was all ag, who were the workers? Native Americans. The Chinese building what they built, and they have revitalized entire regions economically speaking, the African Americans, the Mexican Americans. There's just so much that's missing that it is really—I look back on how selfish the systematic approach of teaching has been and a lot of that has breed the racism, the bigotry. So I'll stop there.

01-00:49:21

Farrell: Yeah, I agree. Speaking of kind of education and knowledge, I'm wondering if you remember how you first learned that the walkouts were going to happen?

01-00:49:33

Polanco: Oh, yeah, Jaime Rodriquez whose brother was an organizer. We were sitting on the bleachers, and the word got out. The word was getting out that there were going to be these walkouts, and we were on the bleachers. When the time came, we looked at each other, we got up, and we walked and so that's kind of how. It may have been kept away from the authorities, but I doubt it because they've already infiltrated, and they were following a lot of folks. But for all intent and purpose, I can say teachers and administrators were probably not aware and so what had happened, it was like, wow.

01-00:50:23

Farrell: Was your basketball coach who said that he was a little unhappy that you did that, was he white?

01-00:50:29

Polanco: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I did not take that to belittle me or—it was something bigger than the basketball game, and I knew that if it came to that, hey, that was the price. But it was not hostile to say the least.

01-00:51:07

Farrell: Okay. Given all of your participation and your activity, what were your early career aspirations?

01-00:51:19

Polanco: I've always wanted to be a lawyer, and I wanted to be elected. By the time I hit high school, I knew that I wanted to hold a public office. I did one year of law school while I was in the legislature. I dropped out. It was just too much to handle. I was chair of the Latino Caucus; we had just come out of 187. Anyway, to your question, those two things. Why a lawyer? Because I saw lawyers in action during those walkouts. They were advocates, they were articulating and arguing toe to toe with someone that historically had always

been able to do so. To see these Latinos, Latina lawyers match themselves up with the other side, to me that was like, oh, yeah, I want to do that.

01-00:52:26

The other was having the experience of leadership and governing or community organizing. My whole career, everything that I did was really to enhance my career path. When I was doing community work, it was because I believed in it. It was because the resources were there at times, and at times, they were not. When I went to work for Ed Edelman as his deputy, that gave me an opportunity. I mean he's a blessing. I had no experience in county government, but my history in dealing with people and community organizing and the various projects, I made up for the loss of experience with enthusiasm, and he gave me my break. To me next to the governor, board of supervisors in LA County, the next most powerful government entity, and I represented all the East Side. When he announced me, he made it, the announcement. To this day, he said—I won't forget it—he said, "You all know Richard Polanco, I want you to know that he's going to be my eyes and ears." I took that to heart, [laughs] and we did a lot of good stuff. Ed brought, appointed myself, Jesus, Arias, not Ron Arias, but Arias, I forget his first name now, Jesus Melendez and Lorraine Alvarez as field deputies or in different categories, different levels, and I was out in the field, and I loved it, I loved it.

01-00:54:35

Farrell:

What do you like about being out in the field?

01-00:54:37

Polanco:

People, challenges, issues, community meetings. It was always difficult to get the supervisor to the community meetings, but when he came, I mean every director, pretty much all the directors of the departments are there because this is a community meeting, and there's going to be issues with the welfare department, there are going to be issues with parks and the supervisor. I mean I saw how you work it, how these resources are there. Unless the people have an opportunity to share them and bring them to light, they're not going to be addressed, and if they are, it's going to take a little too much time. I enjoyed people. The lesson I learned from one particular senior is I went to the event representing the supervisor, and I had one senior said, "Hey, I have a beef, you don't return calls," and yada, yada, and he went on, and so, oh, my God. I accepted that, I said, "I apologize. I want you to know it won't happen again." and I implemented a process to ensure that whenever I did go out to a community meeting that I was not going to be facing that kind of opportunity wherever. That process was back then, you know you had your message pads that were in pink. My secretary would give me the name and the phone number, and I would just jot who I talked to, when I talked to, and the date, and I put them in shoeboxes and kept them. [laughs] It was a way to do two things: One, hold me accountable because you're there to serve and when you feel that it's no longer something worthwhile to do, then get the hell out. When I see staff members that lag it, I was a staff member, I know what it is to lag, and I know when it is when you need to deliver and be true to your

word. They might not like the outcome, but it's like responding to them and being clear. So yeah, I enjoyed it.

01-00:57:16

I also learned a big lesson, inside politics, office politics, how brutal they can be and how it's important to know when you need to build your file to make your case. It reached that point with my outwardness and my doing as much as I was able to do, which I felt I was doing because it was right and because it would advance the interest and the positive images of the supervisor. Well, there were others who thought I was doing it for other reasons. What really broke the camel's back, I think, and then I'll stop is there was—I was in the district office. A Spanish-speaking worker comes in, complains that he's being told to work on private property and on county time and that equipment and material with the county seal are being used. I said, "Oh, my goodness, are you sure?" She goes, "Yes, and I'm scared," in broken English. It was under the CETA program back then, and he lived in Bell Gardens. The business was in fact owned by an LA County who was the road department, the supervisor of the area, and he brought me back pictures.

01-00:59:00

Now, prior to the pictures coming in, I made the inquiry to the chief deputy to say, "Hey, this is what is going on, this is who has come to see me," yada yada yada. Make a long story short, I'm going to conduct the investigation, it's whitewashed, nothing's there. The road commissioner has investigated, and there's no proof to that occurring. I then went back with the photos, the compressor with the county seal, the lawn beams with county indentation inside the building that is being built out by this county worker forcing this individual to do the work. Make a long story short, the commissioner resigned but I began to feel okay, it's coming down.

01-00:59:57

Farrell:

Yeah, and like you can have power in the process as well or agency to do something.

01-01:00:04

Polanco:

Exactly, exactly. What was happening was inappropriate, wrong, period, period. I mean using taxpayer dollars to build out your business, it's like crazy.

01-01:00:16

Farrell:

Right, so you're holding someone accountable. That's important.

01-01:00:21

Polanco:

Yeah.

01-01:00:21

Farrell:

Given your penchant for civic engagement and where your career eventually leads you, what went into your decision to major in business administration

when you're at the University of Redlands and the Universidad Nacional México?

01-01:00:37

Polanco: Yes. I've come to realize that I needed to understand budgets. I needed to understand numbers, I needed to understand the business side of—I understood the government side in that process, but I needed to know how are businesses—how to run a business and reading financials and pro formas. I saw that I could increase my value and my knowledge by having that and make me a much better, rounded individual in the public policy arena.

01-01:01:33

Farrell: What years were you attending?

01-01:01:37

Polanco: At Redlands, it was—I thought I wrote it down. I believe, let's see, about '73.

01-01:01:54

Farrell: Okay.

01-01:01:57

Polanco: Now, the University of México, those were summer courses, and there were political, social, and economic classes that were done at UNAM. I was a college student, and about thirty or forty students, I say about thirty students, we were selected to go. We wanted to participate in this excursion. I was working at a bakery, Dolly Madison, and I was asking for permission to see if they would give me a leave because most of the baking jobs back then were union and so these were health benefits, retirement benefits, nice hourlies. But I knew that, hey, the summer's too long, but I'm going to ask, and I knew if the answer was no, I was going to go anyways because that was my intention. What an experience, I mean it opened my eyes to what Mexico has to offer and how much influence from the Europeans from Europe, from Spain. I mean all the various influences that make Mexico coupled with the thousands of years of the indigenous history and culture and what they were able to do and accomplish. It instilled some real knowledge base in me, and instilled even more so my appreciation of my mother's roots. I'm of Mexican ancestry. My dad was born in Texas, but his parents are from México, Chihuahua, México, from where my mother was from. The studies were to do comparables of the California political, socioeconomic and look at how they immigrated and what's the comparable or comparable. There's a phrase that I'm missing, but it was just an incredible experience for me to do that.

01-01:04:42

Farrell: Yeah, so you were still getting to take some of the political, economic classes in addition to the business stuff?

01-01:04:47

Polanco: Yes.

01-01:04:48

Farrell:

And seeing what those intersections were between everything, yeah?

01-01:04:53

Polanco:

Yes, yes. And fast-forward, I empowered community colleges to create the Mexico California trade offices. We budgeted and created the California Mexico trade office, tightened the community colleges for expanding opportunities and interchanging of business, product, supplies, whatever it may be. Again giving another frontier of experience into some public policy.

01-01:05:40

Farrell:

Yeah, and opportunities there, too.

01-01:05:41

Polanco:

Yeah.

01-01:05:42

Farrell:

You talked a little bit about your time as a staff member and being involved in politics after you've graduated from college. I know that you were involved in some different nonprofits like Para Los Niños and the Arroyo Vista Family Health Center in Highland Park and the Mujeres alcohol Recovery Home. All of that work, how did that dovetail with your political involvement? Were you doing that work at the same time as you were active or were they separate?

01-01:06:19

Polanco:

So Para Los Niños, I was working with Ed Edelman at the time, and I read this article Tanya Hall the executive director, founder and I said to myself, oh, my goodness, where she established the center? In Skid Row, in the heart of Skid Row, Para Los Niños. I went out, and I volunteered, and I volunteered, and I helped build the sandbox with the playground apparatus. That was part of when I was with Ed Edelman.

01-01:07:00

Then the Arroyo Vista Family Health Center, I took a leave of absence from Jerry Brown's staff, and I worked with a gentleman, Jerry Shore who was from back east who had the experience. In between he and I, we put together the application and the funding for the Arroyo Vista Family Health Center. My background is in housing and redevelopment, I served in that capacity and so I had read in the past the HUD guidelines because I had to. I had this responsibility of representing the project area committee, which was the citizen component, to this \$24 million redevelopment. I remember reading a section called Section 108. And Art Snyder was the council member, and Art Snyder had already allocated all the HUD money for projects throughout his council district. Jerry and I and Celestino Beltran we went to the councilman and presented to him Section 108, which is an opportunity to get a loan in the present but have it be repaid in the future, and we were able to use that to acquire the land.

01-01:08:28

I then traveled to New York to look at their outreach program. I was blown away. If you can recall, redevelopment had a very negative connotation in many parts of the country. Well, I went to New York, and I could see why. But they had this outreach program that we modeled after where we would train local community residents to go out and recruit and inform and hold meetings. The ability to pay was the basis from which we would charge, and if you couldn't, then you wouldn't. To your question, yes, I took a leave from Jerry Brown's office to establish and work on that, that particular project. Let's see what was the other one? I think you had three.

01-01:09:35

Farrell:

Well, how long was the leave that you took?

01-01:09:37

Polanco:

I think it was about two and a half years. Yeah, and then I came back and then ran for office in '86, and lost my first race.

01-01:09:46

Farrell:

Okay. I definitely want to talk about that. Before we get there, can you tell me a little bit more about your time working for Governor Brown?

01-01:09:56

Polanco:

Yes, LeRoy Chatfield had gone to work for Jerry Brown. I had met LeRoy Chatfield in the Esteban Torres race. I basically was the governor's representative in the Southern California area. I worked out of the LA office, and I was really doing a lot of what I had already been doing with Ed Edelman—representing the governor, took a very active part in the appointment process. Jerry Brown back then really diversified state government like never before. You compared then to the now, and there's no comparison, I mean Jerry Brown was way ahead and so it was at that point in time that it gave me again some state experience.

01-01:10:47

There was a unit of community relations, and that's the unit that I fit into and so it was really another opportunity. A little awkward because I was used to having the presence of a supervisor, Edelman when I needed. Here, it was statewide, and it was a lot different.

01-01:11:14

Farrell:

Probably much harder to get face time with them.

01-01:11:16

Polanco:

Oh, yeah, oh, absolutely, yeah.

01-01:11:18

Farrell:

What did your work entail in the appointment process?

01-01:11:22

Polanco:

Well, we would recommend folks, I could name a couple of judges that became judges, Jaime Corral, Jamie Casas, and our role was to help bring qualified candidates to the various boards. Carmen Perez, my dear friend for many, many years, we got her appointed to the California narcotics review board. She served there I think for Jerry Brown's term then Deukmejian came and kept her. Yeah, we did a lot of recommendations of folks to various boards and commissions.

01-01:12:10

Farrell:

How did you go about identifying potential appointees, and how did you vet them?

01-01:12:18

Polanco:

So remember that my experience reaching out with Ed Edelman gave me that real broad base and then working with Jerry Brown, there was a gentleman who really taught me the ropes out of Fresno, that was his geographic area, Leo Gallegos. To your question, how do you vet them, if they were lawyers, right, then you would put them into the right process. If you can't through the first step, which is like get into the attention of the person that's the gatekeeper and then coming from a staff member in the governor's office, then that then leads itself to an entire review process independent of what I say or it's like, okay, now we're going to measure and qualify this individual to see if in fact temperament, experience, yada, yada, yada, yada, yeah.

01-01:13:39

Farrell:

Was there anything specific that you were looking for in potential appointees or that Governor Brown had identified as the qualities or the experience that we want in people?

01-01:13:53

Polanco:

The answer to your question, I wanted Latino and Latinas. I wanted more ethnic minorities represented, and I knew that they had to be qualified and so I was not going to embarrass myself or in bringing somebody that I knew couldn't get out of the home play.

01-01:14:12

Farrell:

Okay, thank you for going into detail about that. From there, I'm curious about what your inspiration was for them running for office, your aspiration to go from a staff member to running for an elected position?

01-01:14:33

Polanco:

East Los Angeles is unincorporated to this day. I was a candidate in the effort to incorporate, and I was one of the five that got elected. However, the issue of incorporation was defeated; therefore you have no council to appoint people to. So myself; Nell Soto, former state senator, we ran; Alex Sotomayor of—executive director of Casa Maravilla; Mr. Sal Garcia from City Terrace, we were a slate, and we all won. We got elected, but we would not have a city

to represent. We were council members without a city, and this was before I even went to work for Ed Edelman.

01-01:15:27

Farrell: I see, okay. I'm wondering if you could tell me about your first—well, I guess technically, it would be your second race then in '86.

01-01:15:39

Polanco: So in '86, it was clear that Richard Alatorre who was a member of the assembly, Art Torres on the assembly side, Peter Chacon—there were other Latinos but I realized that they could be there for as long as they want. That there would not be an opportunity for me to reach my dream unless I created the opportunity and so I went about to create the opportunity. The way I created the opportunity is the existing state senator at the time, Alex Garcia had voted against seniors. I mean he had a bad voting record, and he had a serious drinking issue and was very vulnerable as a result. Labor was not very happy with him and so I began to quietly reach out to labor friends and let them know of my interest, that I would be interested in running. However, I would not run if Richard or Art were to run, and I knew that ultimately, one of them would step up, and that's exactly what happened. Art Torres decided to run therefore creating a vacancy in his district. Now, his district was the entire areas that I had worked my entire life as an organizer with Ed Edelman, et cetera.

01-01:17:39

Farrell: And that was in Northeast LA?

01-01:17:42

Polanco: No.

01-01:17:42

Farrell: No? Was that in East LA?

01-01:17:44

Polanco: East LA.

01-01:17:45

Farrell: East LA, okay.

01-01:17:45

Polanco: Yes, yes. East LA and some of the southeast cities, City Terrace, Boyle Heights.

01-01:17:52

Farrell: Got it okay, got it, okay. What was it like for you to put together that campaign?

01-01:18:01

Polanco: It was not difficult. It was not difficult because I think of all the work that I had done. I have this matrix when people want to run for office, and they

come, and they ask for support. I want to know what you've done in the community, don't tell me your promises, show me, right? Why do you think you're viable financially? Where is your endorsement's going to come from? I mean kind of basic stuff, and I was putting it together. One of two things would happen: Richard and Art would decide not to run, I was ready to run.

01-01:18:48

Farrell:

In terms of endorsements, how did you go about securing them and who were some of the key endorsements that you were able to get?

01-01:18:57

Polanco:

Back then there was the Teamsters, Peralta. Back then, there were the retail clerks who were very upset with the senator. Back then, the issue was the scanning. The scanning bars were just becoming part of—today yes, scanners right? But seniors couldn't read them, and there was this whole labored dispute and debate, and so. The Democratic party, I had participated pretty actively in the Democratic party through my introduction to the party was Carmen Perez. There's a woman that has opened the doors to the Democratic party and has not yet been given that recognition. Many of us got into the Democratic party politics because of her, and she became the vice chair of the Democratic party in California. I ran her campaign. She became the vice chair of the National Democratic Convention—DNC. I ran her campaign. The elements were there, and I knew from a community perspective, when you're in Sacramento, you're detached, the senior groups, the sports associations, the list goes on, and I had a history with them.

01-01:20:33

Farrell:

I'm curious to hear more about Carmen Perez. Can you tell me a little bit more about her and what made her so special to so many people?

01-01:20:41

Polanco:

Well, Carmen grew up in the same neighborhood a couple of blocks away. Unbeknownst to me, when I connect with her, she shares with me the story of her and my oldest sister growing up, and it was like I never knew that. Now, she grew up on Brooklyn and Ford or on Michigan, one of the side streets between Brooklyn and Ford there. One day, we were doing voter registration, and I believe it was for Jerry Brown's campaign out in Long Beach in different parts, right? Carmen is very active by then, and she invites us one day to Sacramento. Dick O'Neill was running, that's how far back it goes, for the Democratic party chair, and it was at the old Senator Hotel when it was the Senator's Hotel.

01-01:21:54

She said, "You're going to be there, I want you to come, I'm going to need some help, I need volunteers." So myself, David Lizarraga, George Pla, Rachel Ruiz, and Fred Fujioka—it wasn't David; I forget who the other gentleman was. But we all show up, and we drove up, and we saved enough money to make sure we have gas to get back. We all lived and stayed in one

room. We were coming from very, very humble, and the incomings were very tight, but we were there for her, and it was my first experience watching how the democratic process works, why the platforms are created. She gave us the real opportunity, the first opportunity to be part of this. Back then, it was Dick O'Neill, Nancy Pelosi, they all began, and they're all friends of Carmen. Carmen, she became not only from the party perspective an officer at the state and national, her appointment to the Long Beach party, the first woman to chair the Long Beach party. She's just an amazing. To this day, we're in touch maybe every other week and so it's a real bond and love that many of us have for her. Even though she—pardon my expression—she always kicks our ass. [laughter]

01-01:23:46

Farrell:

We all need some people to do that for us sometimes.

01-01:23:47

Polanco:

She does it. [laughter]

01-01:23:51

Farrell:

What did you take from running her state and national campaigns within the Democratic party to your own campaign?

01-01:24:01

Polanco:

Well, I was already elected. When I ran her race for the national, I was an assembly member.

01-01:24:09

Farrell:

Okay.

01-01:24:11

Polanco:

I knew that this is a national campaign. The difference between the national and the state is you got the entire country. We took a crew, we went as a crew, the same people that I mentioned, in addition to more by then and we—I laid out the strategy. We had our suite, we knew where the delegates were staying, how many, what's it going to take, you're going to go there, come back in and report constantly. It was like a presidential convention if you will.

01-01:24:46

What was really interesting is [laughs] that you've got to learn to pivot and improvise. We were running against an incumbent state senator from Colorado, Sally Baca, and our strategy was to have the Hispanic caucus who we did the vote count would endorse Carmen. The strategy would be, okay, once we get that, then we go to the African American caucus, and we tell them honor the endorsement. Well, in the middle of her—of Richard Alatorre, former member, who was also helping her, in the middle of his nomination, I'm running the campaign, and I'm going like this to him. Because his whole thing is we're going to have Carmen Perez, we're only going to support one candidate, yada, yada, yada, yada.

01-01:25:52

Well, I get the call that the Puerto Rican delegation has not arrived. [laughs] In the middle of all of this, I get the call. Here's Richard making the nomination and then whispering in his ear, he goes, "However I think in the interest of unity." [laughs] Carmen is like, "What?" She's looking at me, and I walk her out, and I said, "The Puerto Ricans are not here, Carmen." "What? Who is responsible for that?" I named him, and he went after him, and lo and behold, in a matter of maybe an hour, we got in touch with Freddy Ferrer who's the Bronx president, New York—the Bronx borough president, contacted the delegation of Puerto Rico, got proxies in. But by then it would be wrong. Anyway, those were some of the have to pivot.

01-01:27:10

Farrell:

Yeah, quite a learning moment and learning to pivot. [laughs]

01-01:27:13

Polanco:

Exactly. But she went on, and she got elected, both of them got elected.

01-01:27:19

Farrell:

I'm wondering, there's political party platform issues, there's caucus issues, there's individual candidate issues, how did the things that you were interested in, your key platforms coincide with Carmen's or maybe even the Latino caucus at the time?

01-01:27:46

Polanco:

To be very frank and honest, when I was elected, I participated in the party but didn't participate on the platform and stuff, but that was left to other folks. My plate was full, and I trusted whatever would come out, we would review, and if it needed to be challenged, we would do it at the appropriate time. It wasn't like I gave a lot of input to the platform. There were folks that, delegates from my district that I appointed that I trusted, and so there was very little involvement of me. But understanding the rules was very important because ultimately, we use the rules that were later changed. We used the rules to be able to get Richard Alarcon who was in the race against Richard Katz. We were able to get the Democratic party's endorsement by virtue of assigning delegates from different parts of the state. That was like under the radar; no one ever got to see it until it happened. It was like playing by the rules, making the rules work, and so that lend a big plus, big plus.

01-01:29:24

Farrell:

Okay, yeah, that's really interesting. I'm interested to hear more about the special election in '86 when you were elected to fill Richard Alatorre's unexpired term.

01-01:29:41

Polanco:

Right.

01-01:29:41

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about that election?

01-01:29:43

Polanco:

Sure. My opponent Gloria Molina was Art Torres's administrative assistant. I've known Gloria for a long time; I thought that I could win the race. Unfortunately, it didn't come out the way I had thought. The perception is that I was able to get all the support of all the labor groups and all of that, which is incorrect. In the final analysis, I had the United Farm Workers, the machinist, local police support. For the most part, she had Jim Wood who was the County Federation of Labor individual—and pretty much the support of—not pretty much, the support of Art Torres who had committed to friends that he would support me.

01-01:31:02

But what was interesting in the timing was the women's feminist movement in the Latina community was beginning to exercise its power. Comisión Femenil, which is the equivalent to the woman's organization now, I would say, really was excited, was excited about that particular race. We both had volunteers, I think in terms of the record of service, the history, yada yada. What ended up happening in the last week is I was hit with a piece that refer to me as a deadbeat dad. Unbeknownst to the public, which I could've shared, and I'll go through the story, I raised my son with my mom. My mom is monolingual Spanish, and at the time that this is occurring, he is with us. For me to have responded in a letter, which was prepared by my consultant Michael Berman at the time, would have brought my mother into a situation, one where the letter's in English and she's monolingual Spanish. And so that caused me to lose some votes, enough votes for Gloria to win.

01-01:33:03

It's interesting that the key women were supporting her at the time. For whatever reasons, those relationships fell apart. Sandy Sewell was very instrumental and being like a founder of the Comisión Femenil. I had strong women support from the Chicana Action Center, Francisca Flores, Corinne Sanchez who heads up Proyecto del Barrio. I had Nell Soto who wasn't elected at the time. I had my share of women support, Carmen. But the perception is that "Everybody was with me" and nobody was with her, when it's all said and done, you look at the labor list and for all intent and purpose, she was definitely the labor candidate, and we know labor plays a big role. I learned from that, I learned that and prepared because I was given another shot at the apple.

01-01:34:25

I'll never forget that evening. I have photographs, right, and you can just see as the clock ticked, the expressions. When we called it that she had won, I'll tell you my wife, we—I cried like a baby. It really hurt. We took a vacation. We hitched the trailer that my dad had, and we went up north to Mammoth, came back down, and I went right back at it. I went to work to do fundraising for Marty Martinez who ran for Congress and got elected. That's where I met Martha Escutia. Martha Escutia was doing all the op-ed research against

Congressman John Rousselot. She did a phenomenal job. She is the reason why he went down, incredible.

01-01:35:43

When I got another bite at the apple four years later, I was prepared. My son so now is in his forties, so it's some time. As time went on, I learned a lot from that particular race. Any person who enters politics and runs, their life is changed period. I mean their life's in a fishbowl, and there are no secrets, and so it is what it is.

01-01:36:25

Farrell:

Yeah, and you really have to learn how to navigate the public persona and just an image and being able to work with the media and things like that. We'll talk a little bit more about working with media next time, too. But I'm wondering given the experience that you had with that race, what was it like for you to get, as you say, like another shot at the apple four years later?

01-01:36:54

Polanco:

Well, I was determined that what was said and printed was wrong. I got a chance, if it's going to be brought up again, to respond to it. By then, enough people had heard the other side of the story. It was not raised, it didn't come up, I was prepared to deal with it. What I've come to learn is look, when you're attacked, you need to respond. In the first situation with my mother, I just could not. How could a letter signed by her in English? It just would've opened up another—so I chose not to. I think that cost me; I know it did.

01-01:37:51

Farrell:

But it's also like balancing, honoring your mother in that situation. It's a hard call to make by balancing.

01-01:38:00

Polanco:

Yeah.

01-01:38:02

Farrell:

How do you feel about that decision today?

01-01:38:06

Polanco:

I'd do the same, it'd be the same decision, yeah, yeah.

01-01:38:11

Farrell:

That's interesting, too, that four years later, it's a non-issue, you're prepared, but it doesn't come up. Given that that wasn't an issue, how did your experience then four years later, what would you consider your biggest successes from that?

01-01:38:31

Polanco:

From the first race?

01-01:38:32

Farrell:

From the next one.

01-01:38:35

Polanco:

Oh, okay. The district was different. It starts up by the Rose Bowl, the northeast lot of African American, Latino, then into Linda Vista, well-to-do. It comes into the northeast, Highland Park-Mount Washington. By then, the demographics had begun to change. Richard had represented some of that area, and had it not been like two to three to one vote from the northeast part of Pasadena, I wouldn't be here. The African American community supported me overwhelmingly. I did the traditional churches, I knew what it would take, and it would need to be more than what I did in the first one. It's a lot different when you have support and you have a lawyer in Sacramento as a member advocating and taking the stands and making calls.

01-01:39:56

Jesse Unruh was the treasure and Grover McKean was his chief of staff. Every time I'd call because I would be calling for money—I mean I need to put this thing on. I think by the second or third time I had called, I could hear the conversation between Jesse and Grover McKean, "Hey, guess who's calling." "Oh, you're kidding me, is it my third world debt?" [laughs] He would refer to me as a third world debt, and honestly Jesse—I didn't know him all that well, but I stayed, and I took the stand with him when Kennedy attempted to get the delegation nomination in the Carter race, Carter-Mondale race. Definitely, his history is a man of loyalty, loyalty was everything. He didn't have to step up the way he did, but he was always there for me.

01-01:41:16

Farrell:

The question I had just left. [laughs] Okay, I remember it now, I just needed a second. So the night that you win the election, can you tell me what you remember from that night?

01-01:41:39

Polanco:

The night that I win the election, we are in Highland Park at the old Masonic Temple on the second floor in the auditorium with an incredible show of friendship and support. Oh, what I felt was just, yes, my dream has now become a reality, and I was ready, eager to start the work. I was sworn in [and it was] special. It was really interesting, I think I was on the ballot like four times within six or seven months, the special primary, then the general, and then the regular primary as well. But I just felt overwhelmed, I felt that I was ready, I felt very thankful for the work that all these folks had done as volunteers.

01-01:42:54

It's really funny because a core group of my volunteers are my brothers and sisters and nephews, and I mean it's many. The boxes would come in, instead of having the mail house do the stuffing and stuff. My brothers, they'd come in, "Okay, what needs to be done? Just show us what [to do]" and in a matter of hours, it's done. They were always very, very supportive and very helpful. My parents were very, very proud, and certainly by then, Gabriel was born. He was three, four years old when I got elected. We have a picture of him.

The *Sacramento Bee* did a shot with Gabriel, myself, and my wife. Chuck Calderon was my lawyer at the time; I mean he was really hustling for me. It was magnificent. It was a completeness of a dream that became a reality from a kid who would collect bottles every Friday and sold oranges. Unbeknownst to me that one day I would represent many of the housing projects, the Cypress Park neighborhoods where I used to [knocks on the table] knock on the door, and as soon as they open it, I put my smile and say, "Would you like buy some nice, fresh, sweet oranges? They're only fifty cents a bucket." As I walked, it was all good, it was all good.

01-01:44:51

Farrell:

Yeah. We're going to wrap up for this session in a couple of minutes, but I was about to ask you for the last question, what it meant to you to realize your childhood dream of becoming an elected official? You started to talk about that, but if there's anything else, in terms of what it meant to you or maybe as well like you win the election, and what are you most excited for moving forward?

01-01:45:17

Polanco:

I win the election; I'm excited. My first day is on the floor, and I am just blown away at being there and seeing how it really operates and realizing that I get to be quiet and learn for the next six months or a year. That first day, what was evident to me not in the moment but as I continued to serve was depending on the policy, certain mics went up, and these were the go-to, experienced individual members on those subject matters. The depth as time went on just—the Isenbergs—just his ability and when the manic of Curtis Tucker, chair of the health committee went up, you knew that this guy knows what he's going to talk about that they've mastered it. For me, that was my next ambition. I need to master the rules, I need to master how it operates so that I can make it work and bring some changes here.

01-01:46:53

Farrell:

Yeah, that's great, and I think that's a great place to leave it for today and then we'll pick up next time. Thank you so much for you time today and sharing everything that you did. Yeah, I really appreciate it.

Interview 2: May 26, 2021

02-00:00:08

Farrell:

Okay, this is Shanna Farrell back with Senator Richard Polanco on Wednesday, May 26, 2021, and this is our second interview for the California State Politics Project. Senator Polanco, when we left off, we were talking about your election to the assembly. You served in the assembly from 1986 to 1992, and I'm wondering if you could talk about some of your legislative priorities to you personally and also to your constituents during your time in the assembly?

02-00:00:41

Polanco:

Well, when I first got elected, mental health—the health overall policy area was of interest to me. I was placed on the health committee, then I was appointed chair of the mental health committee. The mental health committee, I really felt very close to given that when I was growing up, my mother had a breakdown, an episode, a mental breakdown. I remember running from my house to the church on a Friday to get the pastor, and when I got back, my mother was there still in this state of mind, and the attendants who were there, the ambulance attendants couldn't communicate with my mom. My mom was Spanish speaking, monolingual. From that experience, when I did become chair, I made sure that we developed cultural competency to the degree that professionals' bilingual services be required in the mental health arena. I legislated and created some task force that dealt with mental health.

02-00:02:05

Back then, it was a real stigma, you just wouldn't speak to it, it was hard. I remember having our hearings and the famous actor—I forget his first name—came out and testified on behalf of some of the legislation that I was carrying. Some of that included Medi-Cal Managed Care plans to include a process for mental health services. Now this is back in '94. I began in that capacity, I think, in 1988 and legislated at least a half a dozen kinds of mental health bills. Age was the other area that was of great concern. I conducted some of the first hearings, if not the first hearings in LA County as a member at Plummer Park.

02-00:03:09

My mentor then and still friend today is Michael Weinstein. He is the executive director of the AIDS Health Foundation. They provide healthcare awareness and services across the world, all over the world. There, I wanted to make sure that we established the AIDS or the hospice care standards, we established Medi-Cal reimbursements, we established, I think, a compressive protocol. It didn't happen overnight. I can recall introducing a bill one year and moving it so far and then losing the bill and having to come back or find another vehicle. The bills that I did carry were authorizing the licensure for the congregate living facilities for hospice cares, and it made eligibility for Medi-Cal funding, which was a big thing.

02-00:04:18

Children and youth, very, very important. We criminalized for the first time, believe it or not, the possession of child pornography. Prior to this legislation, it was a civil liberties issue, and I'll never forget the hearing. My friend Burton is the chair and it's public safety committee, and my key witness is a US prosecutor along with other advocacy groups, and I had worked the bill. I mean this is a very liberal committee who were very close to John and so I present the bill, witnesses testify, then he shuts down the committee, and doesn't bring it to a vote. I approached him, and we got into a serious shouting match that we're in it from the first floor, down the hallway into the [laughs] Capitol's elevator, up to his office. He simmered down and I simmered down. I looked him straight in the eye and I said to him, "John, you know I've got the votes, that's why you're doing what you're doing." "No, you don't have the effing votes" in his typical fashion.

02-00:05:41

Farrell:

Why was he against it?

02-00:05:44

Polanco:

Again, it was more of just AIDS—it would be like having possession of something but not doing anything else with it, but you're just viewing it. Possession, what, the testimony took that possession further because now it's used to entice and show to kids and say, this is okay, behavior. Make a long story short to, after a lot of cussing at each other on the way up and then simmering down, coming back, we reconvened, sure enough we got the bill up, and he owed me a dinner. It went to the Supreme Court and they ruled that when they have compelling reason to protect children, it can do so. Basically, that was a major piece of legislation that it was really interesting because I was asked on the assembly floor, I won't name him, but it was like, "What are you doing? This is civil liberty issue." I said, "Well, look at it here, if you really think that that's important, then why don't you host a community meeting in your district? I'll come, I'll present. You can be there, and you can share your views to your constituents and see." Well, obviously, that didn't occur, and so. But that was a major piece of legislation that's used today.

02-00:07:19

It's interesting because the US attorney who testified later became a judge, was appointed. Unfortunately, she did the ruling in the Korean—one of the Korean stores that shot the little girl—the teenager. Her ruling was viewed too liberal, and they just picketed her house, and it became very unbearable for her, but she was an excellent witness.

02-00:07:54

Farrell:

I do also want to hear a little bit more about the AIDS hearings before we get too far down the list.

02-00:08:01

Polanco:

Sure.

02-00:08:02

Farrell:

Because you're in the assembly in the '80s, this is at the height of the AIDS epidemic, the crisis, and obviously at this point too, there's a stigma around this, people are uncomfortable with this idea. It's new, but you're working to try to get medical care covered and be part of the insurance system. What were some of the conversations that you were having with people, who were your allies, how did you work to get these bills before a hearing?

02-00:08:36

Polanco:

Well, the hearings occurred in Hollywood, Plummer Park, and they were public hearings, and we took testimony. From the testimony then, listening staff working with Michael Weinstein began to develop the legislation necessary to address that particular issue. We also then went to Brownlie, the respiratory center or the first hospice care facility here in Elysian Park and saw the importance of having a dignified manner in which to exit your last stages in life. It was a really difficult time. I received so much hate mail from so-called religious leaders of all the religions, not just one in particular.

02-00:09:49

After listening to people's testimony, I knew that we needed to do something, and I realized that this needed to be addressed. I was in a position to address it, and I feared not to do it. I saw this the right thing, as cliché as it sounds, but it was the right thing to do for people. The stigma and the lack of awareness in the Latino community and the African American community was huge. I mean the lack of awareness or information, the lack of accepting was very deep and strong and prevalent. That piece of legislation or those pieces of legislation I think today have been built upon and are doing what I think the role of government gets to do in resolving issues. That was a big education for me both from understanding the history, from just being aware of all the negative bias, prejudice that came, and how we began to really understand it and embrace it and begin to heal and bringing kinds of policies changes. They were not easy. It was not like [snaps fingers] I introduce a bill and it was done, no. There were many a times and you'll see in the legislation at the Senate, I may have reintroduced something that I thought was okay, couldn't pass it over there, but I think I can get it going over here. That was to me a highlight of why I was there in terms of my contribution to humanity.

02-00:12:12

Farrell:

Who did you have testify during the hearing?

02-00:12:17

Polanco:

Well, I remember Michael who was the executive director. I believe we had someone from county health, I believe also someone from the state. Normally, you would set up these hearings with representatives from the key departments. There's always been the lack of funding historically to this category of healthcare need. When it became available, there was a dragging of the process at the county level. I can remember getting calls from Michael to say, "Look, the RFP is out, they have it made," or "It's not out, we need to

get these funds out into the community." I began to hear from other entities that were engaged in this particular policy area as well. But I can't honestly name the individuals; I can tell you from where they came and what departments. I'm sure that's probably some place in an archive someplace.

02-00:13:48

The AIDS, the children, we were seeing children being abused, and at the coroner's office, the process of engaging the various individuals were all siloed, protective services, the investigators. They would come into play at a different point of time, at a different date. What we ended up doing at the request and at the testimony of one of the commissioners on the LA County's family protection—I forget the exact name. But what we ended up doing is creating a task force when we had a child death occur suspected of child abuse. This task force then came all at one time to begin to do the analysis and determination as to the cause of death. The coroner obviously is there, the main person. It was interesting because from what I recall, the fact that some would show up a day later or not or whatever, nothing compelled them to come together comprehensively and do the actual evaluation and come out with a determination as to not only the cause of death, was it at the hands of another and then begin immediately to engage and go into the home and see what else maybe occurring. Let's see. I think it's going to work better if you ask me questions.

02-00:16:09

Farrell:

Great, okay.

02-00:16:10

Polanco:

Yeah. Because I keep looking down at this and it's breaking my train of thought. But if you could ask and guide me through what we have, I think it'll work better for me.

02-00:16:22

Farrell:

Okay, great. I know some of this work was when you were in committees as well, and we're going to get to that in a second. But before we get there, starting with your time in the assembly, you became the chair of the Latino caucus. You've chaired the caucus for twelve years starting in 1990. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience as the chair?

02-00:16:47

Polanco:

Well, yes. I became chair of the caucus, one of the first things I did was recommend we change the name from Chicano caucus to Latino caucus, and I based that on what was occurring demographically in the Latino community. Predominantly, it was Mexican American immigrants, but as time changed and went on, Salvadorians, people from Nicaragua, Guatemala began to have a strong presence. To be more inclusive, I made the recommendation to change the name, which I think was the right thing to do given the demographics today and given all the representation from the various ethnic groups within the Latino community. Early on, it was not difficult to run. I

mean at one time it was Lucille, Chacon, Javier Becerra, and I on the assembly side. On the assembly side, I think three senators, so there was a total of seven of us when I assumed the role.

02-00:18:13

I realized and I learned that the process is a big part of the process is getting to forty-one or to two-thirds depending on the bill. I realized that what was occurring with term limits was going to have an impact that was going to create a turnover of the entire assembly all at one time. I also realized that in 1986, IRCA was established. IRCA was the immigration law that Ronald Reagan signed, and it basically had a very important provision. It said if you're here for five years and you don't become a public charge you can become naturalized through a process. Coupled with that and then coupled with the ugliness that was beginning to occur with 187, the antiimmigrant proposal, followed two years later by the anti-affirmative action, followed another two years with bilingual education, there was just this onslaught of attack upon the Latino community. At the same time, what was occurring is 50 percent of the births that were occurring were to Latino women. I realized that we have an opportunity if we have a plan, if we're organized, and we identify and recruit and bring management campaign to individuals to have a big presence here. The first class, if you will, involve Martha Escutia, Louis Caldera, in that class, Grace Napolitano, Joe Baca, and Diane Martinez, and these were all individuals that came as a result and at the height of what this anti-immigrant—

02-00:20:41

[1992 was a banner year for Latino political empowerment.] Instead of wallowing, we organized, and I was able to put together support, financial support because the candidates were good. Martha Escutia, excellent candidate. Louis Caldera, the pedigree of Harvard grad, Law School, and MBA, grew up in Boyle Heights in the district that his mom still lived in. [Grace Napolitano, Diane Martinez, Joe Baca are all candidates that I recruited and helped get elected.] The quality of the candidates was superb, and what was missing was their inability to raise money to finance the campaign, and what was missing was the campaign management as well as the policy development, and we provided all of that.

02-00:21:37

When we began to expand and go beyond this first class, and in 1993 the next person was Cruz Bustamante in the valley, and Cruz was the field deputy for the assembly member of the district who decided to leave because of term limits. Make a long story short, Cruz was breaking the glass ceiling in the Central Valley. [In 1994 Denise Moreno Ducheny, Martin Gallegos, Liz Figueroa, we help get elected. In 1996 Deborah Ortiz, Sally Morales Havice, and Tony Cardenas get elected.] Tony Cardenas who ran in the valley here in Los Angeles. What's interesting is as you look back, they have established and institutionalized in these regions, for example—let me finish the thought—the ability to grow the presence of representation from within those regions. So

Tony comes, then Richard Alarcon comes. Alex Padilla is Tony's campaign manager at the time. You have then Nury Martinez who is now a council president who managed assemblywoman Cindy Montanez's campaign. There you've built these infrastructures throughout the region, which is very important because it now institutionalizes the presence and a process by which you can run and get elected to office. The caucus grew; it became a little more complicated to manage. I had a real basic rule that I think really worked, and that was everyone had veto power. It was never going to be an opportunity for me to make it a Polanco plan, a Polanco thing that no. But you had to speak up, you had to voice your veto, and your opposition. We would establish policy and campaign strategies based on everyone participating and then having the equal power to disengage or not engage. [Gilbert Cedillo (one bill Gil) is elected in 1997. In 1998, Sarah Reyes, Marco Firebaugh, Lou Correa, Richard Alarcon, and Nell Soto get elected. In 2000, Manny Diaz from San Jose, Simon Salinas from Salinas Valley, Dario Frommer, Ed Chavez, Dean Flores, Jenny Oropeza, and Gloria Romero get elected. I can honestly say that I played a significant role in changing the profile of the greatest Public Policy Institution during my sixteen years in the California State Legislature.]

02-00:24:03

Farrell:

How often would people veto things?

02-00:24:05

Polanco:

Well, when we could come to the political campaigns, that would be every two years so that wasn't as often, but when we did, it would be done one of two ways: One, let's say two members are supporting two candidates in one race. One you know is much better qualified, the member who is endorsed can either remain silent and on the boat or can voice it, but it has to be expressed. It happened, not as often. That rule was changed with the new leadership that came after I was elected. I think Marco Firebaugh then became chair, ended up. We were very fortunate to have the winds behind us when we were doing this.

02-00:25:08

Farrell:

Yeah, and you had mentioned that instead of wallowing during the winds of change at this point and you were motivated by that. I know that you increased the membership from seven democratic Latino legislators to twenty-four. Do you feel like that was because people were feeling motivated?

02-00:25:27

Polanco:

Yes. The Republican Party had become quite frankly toxic in our community with Pete Wilson and the ads, followed up with Newt Gingrich at the federal level. Remember there was the whole contract with America, we had lost control of Congress, Democrats lost control of the legislature, but for this cycle in which we engaged, we were able to reconstitute majority in the state assembly. But not just the anti-immigrant issue, the anti-affirmative action issue, the anti-bilingual education issue, which is interesting because today now, Senator Lara when he was in the Senate authored an initiative that talked

about dual immersions of languages that received the highest percentage of voters, which was contrary to Reid who pushed the anti-bilingual education act. It's how society has changed, it's how we frame the issue, and so, yes, term limits assisted because there was a turnover, and there would be a constant turnover every six years and every eight years.

02-00:26:58

The anti-immigrant movement assisted in propelling the fact that we, as a caucus, initiated citizenship, actual citizenship drives in our community colleges. I would travel up and down the state in the morning, show up to a different part, and there's like 3000 people lined up going through the process of getting fingerprinted and beginning that process. When we did the analysis, about 500,000 new citizens came through. That's significant in terms of voting because you become citizens and the next step is the voter registration card. I will say and argue, as I did very early on, the labor movement not the party, the labor movement is what it is today because of the immigrant population.

02-00:28:02

Farrell:

I would agree with that. We are going to talk a little bit more about that in a minute. This might be jumping a little bit but thematically staying with the caucus, you had mentioned Prop 187, and I'm wondering what the caucus did? It got repealed in 1999, so how the caucus was involved in that effort?

02-00:28:28

Polanco:

Most of the organizing came from labor. Gilbert Cedillo was the Local 660 general manager along with Kevin de Leon who was not elected yet with one-stop immigration along with other community groups. The real organizing effort at the community level was coming from the community. Our role at the time, Dick Mountjoy who was the face of the anti-187 movement was introducing or trying to introduce amendments in the legislature on health care that would deny health care to undocumented, on education that would deny education. What we were engaged in internally is just putting out the fires and making sure that no amendment was being attached to any particular bill that would bring forth the kind of outcomes that the voters ultimately voted to support on 187. We engaged with the community groups and supported the community groups in whatever way we possibly could. That was a real turning point for our community, and when it's followed with the other initiatives, it was like they hit us three times, and it's no wonder that 70 percent of Latino voters continue to go voted for Democrats. That's the price of the Republican Party plays or gets to pay.

02-00:30:21

It was interesting because at the time, Wilson was doing all this anti-advertising, Governor Bush was doing the opposite in Texas. If you're going to win national campaigns, you need to have at least 35 percent to 40 Latino voters and so this was very calculating, but also I think it was from his heart. He had family members who were immigrants and so there was that contrast.

02-00:31:01

Farrell:

Yeah, that's really interesting, that's really interesting. In 1994, you got elected to the state Senate. Can you tell me a little bit about the election process when you transitioned from the assembly to the Senate?

02-00:31:19

Polanco:

I really did not do a lot of campaign literature. My staff in the district office was phenomenal. There was not a community project and a parent advisory group, a church group, a soccer team, you name it, that our presence was felt there. Having served the eight years in the assembly, I wasn't really challenged for the Senate; I had a republican dentist who ran. I did my own newspaper, and I did it with a reason. I had a difficult time with the media. I had a difficult time starting when they reported a couple of issues that were not factually correct, and it really propelled my suspicion with certain reporters. The big incidence was the siting of the prison in East LA. I grew up in East LA, East LA has one zip code, it's 90022. The site was seven miles away, not in East Los Angeles. East Los Angeles, the unincorporated area, that's East Los Angeles; Boyle Heights is a different community in the city of LA. The media just kept saying that it's being sited in East LA when it wasn't, and it was through my legislation that ensured that project did not go through.

02-00:33:31

Where I felt out of integrity in the process was I've always believed that the change comes from within the community, and you honor that of what the community has brought forth. Because I got caught up in 90022 East LA, I chose to allow for the debate to commence, and that was probably an err on my part in that I just should have spoken up more, had the media report it correctly and accurately. There was another time in a public hearing where this one particular reporter would make things up. Bill Mabie who was my press person was fabulous, was excellent. When *the Times's* Dan Morain realized that there's this emergence of Latinos in the assembly, he reached out to Bill Mabie. Based on the conversations he was having with these new members, they were all, "How did you get elected, who supported you?" and all of a sudden, it's coming here, and I'm one who doesn't wear it on the sleeves per se. There was a Dan Morain and another individual went to Bill, said, "We want to do a story." I have experienced, they build you up. I've seen it, they build you up and bring you down, I was very suspect. Make a long story short, I did agree, and I think they did like seven months of investigative work, and the report was like two pages, Polanco the architect of Latino politics. It was something I would never had expected, but it was sharing the story of what they were getting from the new members and how and what was done and so without me having to validate it or it was validated by virtue of the *Los Angeles Times* reporter and that certainly made me feel good, and that loosened me up to having conversations with media folks.

02-00:36:52

Farrell:

Okay, that's interesting, I appreciate you going into that a little bit. Is that essentially what inspired your idea to do the newspaper for the senate campaign?

02-00:37:05

Polanco:

No, I was already in the senate.

02-00:37:09

Farrell:

Okay, okay.

02-00:37:10

Polanco:

Yes, yes. No, what inspired me were when I was in the assembly, the reporting that was done there. It was interesting because when *The Times* would editorialize and make reference to assembly bills or senate bills that they were supporting and stuff, they would always put the author's name if it were non-Hispanic—if it were Hispanic names, they wouldn't. It was like there's a history with the *LA Times* that is like if you look at—well, let me just be very blunt. There's a history of folks who have worked there as reporters who have come and made reference to the fact that if they want you, they'll come and get you, and they did that to a former assembly member, council member, very blunt, the editorial board, go get them, boom. They've always reported very stereotypic.

02-00:38:22

When they commissioned the cartoon of me in Aztec regalia with a dagger and it's about diversity and Tom Hayden has an editorial, an op-ed piece on the bottom, and I referred to up on top on the cartoon with like I said holding a baby Aztec warrior, Aztec king, that was racist. I was referenced as too ethnocentric, too ethnic. There's a history with our *Los Angeles Times* paper that bothers me, that creates distrust.

02-00:39:17

To your original question, how did I campaign? I did a beautiful calendar, beautiful. We laid it out, it was about that big, full color, and each month had holidays of different ethnic groups. I had a small picture of myself with a quote. I had a popular bill that talked about that piece of legislation and for 365 days, they're churning that and so I found that to be my way of staying in the room.

02-00:40:00

The other way that I helped organize the bill was we did fingerprint cards for kids. Every elementary school, we would go and perform and offer with law enforcement fingerprint cards. In case your child ever goes missing, you have it available.

02-00:40:23

Farrell:

Were people receptive to that? How did people respond to that?

02-00:40:31

Polanco:

Yeah, the messengers were important, which is why the parent advisory groups that we engaged with trusted us. We would always go through the parent and we would never impose ourselves. Hey, this is to offer, it's available, yes, then they would get done.

02-00:40:51

Farrell:

Okay, I see. In terms of the calendar and the newspaper, who would you distribute that to?

02-00:40:56

Polanco:

To the voters in the district.

02-00:40:59

Farrell:

Okay, and would you just kind of blanket send it out to their homes?

02-00:41:02

Polanco:

Yeah, it would go through mail, yes. It was a mailer; it was a political calendar mailer with information. It was educational in the sense that it had Jewish holidays, it had African American holiday, it had pictures of various site locations in the district, and it was really professionally done.

02-00:41:25

Farrell:

How many issues of the newspaper?

02-00:41:26

Polanco:

We did two.

02-00:41:27

Farrell:

Two, okay, great.

02-00:41:28

Polanco:

Two issues of the magazine, one issue of the newspaper.

02-00:41:35

Farrell:

Oh, that's a great idea. [laughter]

02-00:41:37

Polanco:

Yeah.

02-00:41:39

Farrell:

Also when you got elected, you were representing District Twenty-Two, so downtown LA, Chinatown, Little Tokyo. How did your campaigning in that district differ from the districts that you represented in the assembly?

02-00:41:56

Polanco:

Well, now, it's a larger district. Now, it's a more diverse district both ethnically and socioeconomically speaking. The district now has the interests, the community interests of the Korean community, the Japanese community, the Chinese community. Every Salvadorian or every South American group pretty much in the downtown MacArthur Park area is now in the district and

so the needs, Chinatown—the needs are many and diverse. I credit my effectiveness on my staff who worked for me out in the field. Che Mui who worked for me in the Asian community. We got him—bless him, he left us too early. He did marathons, et cetera, et cetera and died of cancer very early in his age but also got elected as the first Chinese American in the San Diego Valley City Council, was very instrumental in reaching out to the Korean community. I did some legislation on their Soju beverage. With the Chinese, the contractors that did the sewing, we helped organize them, we helped bring banking and business practices to them. It was just different, and again, my staff did a phenomenal job representing the entire diversities that exist there.

02-00:43:52

Farrell:

Can you tell me about what you remember from election night when you found out you won?

02-00:44:01

Polanco:

The district building is a former Masonic temple, huge with a first floor, a second, and a third floor. It's in Highland Park, and we had upstairs in the hall the gathering. We knew that we were going to be successful only because the district is so overwhelmingly Democrat. I had support from Republicans and Democrats in the district and so it was a great evening. But I would have been shocked had the dentist after eight years of service—had he come out on top, I would've been really shocked. But obviously full of joy, another eight years, and it's again giving me the opportunity to continue to be of service to people and to our community. It was a lot different from my first, which I lost obviously and my second, which I won. My second was a bit of a challenge nevertheless for the assembly, but running for the senate was not as difficult as the other two.

02-00:45:43

Farrell:

What was it like for you to transition from the assembly to the Senate?

02-00:45:48

Polanco:

Well, the immediate effect is when you're on the Senate floor, the deliberation. The committee, the deliberation is different. Everything is voice vote, not electronically. You wonder how everything gets handled on the Senate side—[cell phone rings] excuse me. Everything gets handled on the Senate side by a process that is slower, more deliberate, and much more cordial, more decorum. There is this different about it than the assembly.

02-00:46:39

Farrell:

Were there any colleagues of yours that were either mentors for you or close allies that you were working with in your early days in the Senate?

02-00:46:50

Polanco:

Yes. I was close to Richard Alatorre who was the assembly member. I was also close to Art Torres who was also a member of the assembly at the time. I can't say that I was close to Ruben Ayala, but I will say that prior to Ruben getting elected to the Senate, in my early twenties, I was on a bus with

Esteban Torres and a group headed over to walk for him when he ran for supervisor in Riverside, and that was my first encounter with him. And then with Peter Chacon, he was chairman of the redevelopment committee and I come from redevelopment, and I testified before him with Maravilla Project Area Committee on the importance of citizenship component. My relationships were already established with the members on the other side, and they were good. They were pleasant, there was this respect, it was not as polarized as we see today.

02-00:48:16

I remember my encounter several times with Jim Brulte specifically on a particular appointment—that of a trustee. The trustee Dr. del Junco was a trustee at the UC regents. He had come out adamantly in support of 187, and we found that to be crossing the line as a trustee. He was up for reconfirmation. Marco Firebaugh is graduating from law school, I'm invited to come and speak, and I get carried away and make the declaration that Tirso del Junco will not be reappointed, get a standing innovation. At the end, Marco comes over, he goes, "Okay, boss, now you've got deliver." Make a long story short, he did not get reconfirmed, and he should not have. Here's a gentleman who is a doctor in East Los Angeles whose clients are immigrants, and lo and behold, I get a letter from him asking for assistance to increase the Medi-Cal rates, and he talks about the immigrant population that he's serving. I found that just unacceptable and so there was a price.

02-00:49:54

I was visited by a person who was on my finance committee, and I'll talk a little about that because that played a big role in helping me finance campaigns. The individual comes to meet me, and we sit down. I'm senate majority leader, and the office can accommodate like fifty people, and it's all just antique furniture, I mean really overwhelming when you walk in, whomever you are, CEO of whatever, right? I mean, it has that presence. He sits down and he begins to ask me, "Look, is there any way that you would consider supporting Tirso del Junco?" He's come to visit me, this is him talking, and I'm looking at him, and I said to him—I wouldn't use the words that I used then. I said, "There's no way. This man does not deserve to be trustee, and there has to be consequences for those public officials who take stands like he did. If there aren't consequences, then it's easier the second time and the third time, and we're not going to let that happen." He said, "Okay, I agree, okay," and he was off.

02-00:51:16

I had a core group of about fifteen folks that helped me raise money, not necessarily that I would use in my campaign but that back then you could transfer unlimited amounts. I look at a lot of campaign reform with a jaundiced eye because once we learned to play by the rules, the rules get changed, and the goalpost gets moved. We were very effective, and I had individuals who represented different policy areas that I could go to and get advice, not always agree with them—at times yes, at times no. I found that to

be very instrumental and helpful. I also had a core group of associations that included the dental association, the optometrist association, Edison. There were about five or six, and I would go and meet with them and say, "Okay, here are all the candidates running this," or they would call me and say, "Hey, can we meet? We want to go over the races." I would be very open, "These are the strengths, these are the weaknesses, this is why I think they will not win, this is why I think they will win." It was that kind of trust that was put together, and it was that kind of trust that assisted us as a caucus to help finance. Some of these candidates that we had supported couldn't raise a nickel but turned out to be excellent candidates.

02-00:53:11

Farrell:

Did you feel like since you've had a lot of relationships established—you had been in the assembly—you did mention that you hit a goal and the goalpost moved and the rules changed. But do you feel like because you had those relationships established and you knew where to go that financing your senate campaign was a little bit easier because you knew what you were doing or how did you feel?

02-00:53:35

Polanco:

Yes. The financing of the senate campaign was a lot different than the financing of the assembly race, no question. There was not a lot of fundraising that I had to do for myself to get myself reelected. I was fundraising, and I came across some documents, number of mailers, cost, I mean. Yeah, it was a lot different, and I did not have to go out and raise money to get myself reelected or to get myself elected to the Senate to the degree that I did in the other two campaigns. But you're right, in terms of relationships, politics is all about relationships, and I always say don't burn the bridge that you cross because one day you may have to come back and cross it, and I subscribe to that. My political points of view with Republicans, I always leave the door open, and I've gone to them many a times to help give me a vote when I know there are issues that I'm not going to be able to get my liberal colleagues on if you will.

02-00:54:52

Farrell:

You were elected in 1994, and one of the things that happens in 1994 is that Newt Gingrich publishes the book *Contract with America*, which advocated for the Republican Party during the '94 congressional elections, and the Democrats lost majority. What do you remember about that time, and how did that impact your work either in general in the Senate or as chair of the Latino caucus?

02-00:55:20

Polanco:

Yeah. I was aware of the change of the guard in Washington, republican president, republican House, republican Senate. Same happened here in the legislature, but it's the time when we're running candidates and getting people elected and so I did not let that distract me. I knew that we had to be disciplined and execute what we have put together. Our interest was to protect

that of what we had, advocate and build, and go into districts that were non-ethnic minority districts, non-Latino districts and run qualified candidates who were crossover candidates, Liz Figueroa, crossover candidate. I think she had a district of 19 percent Latino population when she ran for the assembly, Deborah Ortiz, crossover candidate, and the list goes on and on. What happened there really whether consciously or unconsciously, we were ready just to execute what we were going to do.

02-00:56:45

Farrell:

Did you feel like that book or that period of time had a long-term impact on the party or even in losing majority in the assembly?

02-00:56:55

Polanco:

Well, it had an impact on certainly losing the majority, but through the speaker's brilliance, it took like almost a year to get a Republican to become speaker. If you recall, it was Willie [Brown]—you need forty-one, and Willie always had three to four republican votes and so he drew, and it was just drawn out. Ultimately, Curt Pringle became speaker, and if I'm not mistaken at the time, and he got to serve for a short period of time. They were not running the House; they were not running the policy agenda. Even though they had forty-one, there were Republicans there, like I said, who were more aligned in allegiance to Speaker Brown than to the Republican Party. I mean it affected us in one sense that we lost control, we were the minority party, but that was short-lived I think.

02-00:58:07

Farrell:

So it wasn't any harder to get bills passed or anything?

02-00:58:09

Polanco:

No. No, not at all.

02-00:58:12

Farrell:

Okay.

02-00:58:12

Polanco:

Yeah, the difficulty was to have a republican governor veto some good bills.

02-00:58:19

Farrell:

Yeah. Well, on that note with the bills, I wanted to talk about some more of the bills that you were involved in throughout your career. We talked a little bit about the AIDS hearing, but the authoring the legislation that eventually became Cesar Chavez Day. That SB 984 and ended up passing twenty-three to zero so that's pretty significant. Can you tell me a little bit about what initiated that process and your experience writing that bill?

02-00:58:56

Polanco:

Well, I was not the first to introduce it, number one. The bill had been introduced years earlier by Art Torres. When Art Torres didn't take up the bill, but introduced the bill. I introduced it in the assembly, and I don't think I remember getting it out of the assembly, but I know I introduced it, I

remember I introduced it. The fact that I introduced it in the Senate was a whole different time frame. To your question, here was a true American's veteran labor leader that took on the cause and created a movement that was so inclusive. When you look at the farmworker movement in terms of the organizers and the directors, they came from all over the country of all shades and colors. It was a movement that was really about bringing dignity to a worker that for many years was discriminated against, was abused, people who put the food on the table. My wanting to celebrate this individual was not just the individual but to celebrate what the farmworker movement represented and what he represented.

02-01:00:53

The more important component of that bill, the Cesar Chavez holiday is that it's about community service. There's a component there that lays out and instructs the state to create curriculums and districts to look at giving back to the community, doing community projects. From the time that it was introduced, there were just a tremendous amount of parks being cleaned up convalescent homes, schools. Everyone was now beginning to participate in a day of service as Cesar would want it to be remembered, as a day of community service.

02-01:01:42

I remember when Paul, his son and Richie Ross came to see me or Paul was on the phone, Richie came to see me. They wanted to amend the bill, and I felt no, look the bill is how it should be. They began to explain these added to components to it, and I embraced it wholeheartedly from then on. There was a question of when do I bring it up, right? It was brought up, no votes on it. I would've liked to have seen Republicans vote for it, but it is what it is for whatever reason they may have. But it has continued every year, it's to honor him, honor the farmworker, and that movement and what they represent, and to create a day of service to give back to the community. That's the intention of that.

02-01:02:47

Farrell:

You had mentioned there were some added components. What were those?

02-01:02:54

Polanco:

One, it instructed, I believe, that the state department of education to outline in curriculum so that school districts could follow or have a guideline. The other was referenced to community service.

02-01:03:14

Farrell:

March thirty-first being a day off, instead of a holiday or like a vacation time, it's a way of giving back?

02-01:03:21

Polanco:

Right.

02-01:03:23

Farrell:

Got it, okay. Given that you had participated in the history walkouts when you were in high school and now here you are in this position, what did working on this bill mean to you personally?

02-01:03:37

Polanco:

It was very personal to me. When Cesar and Helen were out and helping me in my campaign, they stayed at my parent's home. I remember looking at Cesar's hands and looking at my dad's hands, and these men were, first of all, heroes to me, number one. The experience of being around Cesar and being around those close to him, it's very spiritual. There's this calmness and peace that is from within, and you look at him, and you know that this is an individual who cares deeply. His influence goes to the pope, it's just astonishing, it's amazing how such a humble guy was able to create due to this integrity, due to his never losing sight of why and what and for what purpose he was organizing this group of workers. His history is he was an organizer for the CSO, the Community Services Organization, and he left the organization to organize farmworkers. There was a lot of debate and discussion, but he felt that this group, his calling was to organize them, and he did. Yeah, very, very humble, very spiritual, very powerful presence, yet very calming.

02-01:05:51

Farrell:

When was the first time you met him?

02-01:05:55

Polanco:

I met Cesar the first time at the home of Joe Sanchez. Joe Sanchez, he founded the Mexican American Grocers Association. He was the first Mexican American commissioner to the LA City Fire Commission, and he was very, very strong supporter of Cesar Chavez and the UFW. It was at his home where he was doing a fundraiser for the United Farm Workers when I first met Cesar. One of my actions, I closed down a Lucky store, a Lucky market store. They used to be around, and I went in at 8:00 in the morning and leafletted and let the people know that Cesar Chavez is asking you not to buy here, that we're boycotting, to please go to another market. Sure enough, I don't know if I shared it you, but by twelve o'clock the only vehicles on the parking lot were the employees. To me that was just like, wow, it signified the power of one, the impact that one person can have.

02-01:07:29

Farrell:

I guess, the first time you met him, what were your first impressions, what do you remember, and then I'm also curious about what you learned from him and brought into your career?

02-01:07:44

Polanco:

My first impressions, I saw him conduct a community meeting in our front yard, my parents' front yard during the campaign. What we did is we mailed out to half a dozen precincts around, and Cesar was there, and I watched him connect, and I saw just the respect that the people gave. For many, it was the first time they ever saw him in person, they I have read or seen, but in person.

I watched his way of communicating, his way of expressing himself, and articulating why it was important to have in this case, me elected.

02-01:08:54

Cesar realized that it didn't have money, the union didn't have contribution money like other unions. But he realized that he had foot soldiers who would come and be trained on how to deliver the message and how to talk and where to go. I know Jack O'Connell has said many a times, "I was elected because Cesar and the farmworkers came to walk for me in Ventura, that's how I got elected."

02-01:09:34

To your question, how did that feel? Oh, it's all sorts of feelings and emotions, all very good, all very positive, but the humbleness of this man. I think if what I learned is how to be humble. I believe I'm humble, but to see it from a great leader like that who is—it resonated for me. It resonated for me, it resonated the importance of bringing people together and making them part of this and do it in a setting in a home, in a yard. It doesn't need to be in the campaign headquarters or a big hall, you go where the people go. People around him I was trained by Marshall Ganz and Jessica Govea. Marshall is teaching I think at Harvard. Fred Ross, I was trained by Fred Ross, I owe a lot to the UFW.

02-01:11:08

Farrell:

The bill was officially signed by Gov. Gray Davis on August 18, 2000. How do you feel that the bill ensures the legacy of Chavez?

02-01:11:22

Polanco:

I think that the way that it ensures it is the day before his birthday or on his birthday, you can just log on, and you will see schools having assemblies, schools having community projects. There is just a lot of acknowledgement of his legacy that goes on. You see it with streets being named, schools being named, parks named after him, sculptures in community settings. It's long and it's deep in terms of the acknowledgement of this man.

02-01:12:16

Farrell:

It'd be lovely if it was a national day as well.

02-01:12:20

Polanco:

There was a time when there was some organizing towards that effort, and I think the time is right to push for that. Cesar's granddaughter works in the administration dealing with the government affairs liaison, meaning she's dealing with local governments, state governments, and the Congress. He had Cesar's bust head in the Oval Office, so it won't surprise me, but it won't happen unless people advance it.

02-01:13:13

Farrell:

Yeah, very true, yeah. Well, fingers crossed for that in the future. Another bill that you authored was an after-school and summer school program, which passed in 1998. That provided \$150 million for after-school and summer

school programs and also pioneered California citizenship education program, which as you touched on, assisted more than half a million Californians in becoming naturalized citizens. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience authoring that bill?

02-01:13:47

Polanco:

Yes, the first bill with the after-school came at the suggestion of my constituent who was a school board member, Pasadena Unified School District. She and I met, she said, "It would be great, we don't have this, we need this, I know what it was growing up having summer programs with the elementary school I went to, they're like everything." I introduced the bill, and we made it an ongoing appropriation, so it was there every year, and it was again listening to your constituents. That's where the policy comes from. You can see things as a legislator and you can initiate, but there's also that other vehicle that I always paid close attention to in terms of facilitating and or making available some public change. Yeah, Ms. Wyatt, Marjorie Wyatt, schoolboard member, her husband interesting was the parliamentarian for the Democratic Party for thirty, forty years, yes, for a long time, yes.

02-01:15:18

So how did that feel? It felt great. If I'm not mistaken she came and testified, we had folks come, and it made money available for summer after-school programs that are needed. The whole latchkey kid situation was prominent back when, to some degree, I think it still is. That was that particular piece. Can you refresh my memory on the second piece of the question?

02-01:15:52

Farrell:

Yes, it was the California citizens education program, which helped more than half a million Californians become naturalized citizens.

02-01:16:00

Polanco:

Right, yeah, I believe that there's a caucus. We ended up doing an actual handbook, and that became how to become naturalized. We budgeted \$10 million in the budget for naturalization and we then leveraged that with 10 million that came from the federal government. The state department of community services were the responsible entity to make the grants available. We wanted to make sure that no fly-by-nights were coming up, so you had to have had a record of (1) being a nonprofit, (2) doing this kind of service already, and so that is how we were able to get to the 500,000 new citizens through that particular funding mechanism and reaching out.

02-01:17:00

Farrell:

Yeah, that's pretty significant. Another one a few years later was the California voting act in 2001, and so that expanded on the federal voting act of 1965. Can you tell me a little bit about what was going on leading up to working on the voting act and what your involvement was in that?

02-01:17:28

Polanco:

I need to acknowledge really the attorney that brought a federal case in Watsonville. It's referred to as the Watsonville voting rights act or Watsonville case. Joaquin Avila, attorney who unfortunately passed I think last year, was working with Saeed Ali, my staff and I in putting together the legislation. What was happening at the federal level, as we see even more prominent now, was the whittling away by the Supreme Court of the voting rights act section—the preclearance had been talked about and removed. It's very costly to bring a voting rights act claim at the federal level and what we were able to do is pretty much codify the voting rights act at the federal level with state legislation. We included prevailing attorney fees. Meaning that if you win the case, then the plaintiffs get to collect; if you lose the case, then you got to ante up.

02-01:18:53

This allowed for a process that goes something like this. You look at a city, and you see that the city historically has large population of ethnic minorities. You see that the ethnic minority vote has a voting bloc, and you see that the nonethnic minority vote as a voting bloc, and you have district-wide elections. The California voting rights act basically, we made the claim that the protective voting class, which include Latino, blacks, Asians, at large elections, dilute the vote and the choice when you have polarization occurring. When you prove that and you have to prove it, and you prove it through a formula, mathematical formula, historical elections. For example, the most recent Santa Monica, they have at-large elections, there is history in the election cycle that shows a minority, in this case, a woman Latina who gets the highest vote however when you go to the district-wide because you do the primary, then what happens is the inability to win because of the polarization that takes place. Yet if you had districts, then the representatives in those districts have the ability to vote for someone of their choice and so there's a pattern of polarization.

02-01:21:01

At-large elections also will allow for hypothetically five members of the council live in three, four blocks from each there, and that's not representative from the California voting rights act. When you have populations that vote not just for candidates but on issues but are not able to overcome when they go district-wide and so you then file a lawsuit, a letter to the council and you advise them that they may be in violation of the voting rights act and then that triggers all sorts of steps. Over 200 cities in California now have gone from district-wide elections to district elections. To me, that's representative of government, that's representing communities. There's still a resistance. Santa Monica is in the Supreme Court of California as we speak claiming that their at-large district elections do not violate the voting rights act. We say that it does, and here's the empirical data.

02-01:22:24

I strongly believe in elections by district but not at large. To me, that's true democracy to true representation. It gets people engaged with the nitty-gritty issues that are within that district. The other side of the argument is, oh, well, then you're just looking at the big-city picture. Well, you've got to take care of the base first. That's me. The California voting rights act, we brought it forth because it was really clear to me as the author and sponsor that we needed to protect, we needed to protect the voting rights of people. That what we see today across the country with all the challenges and so on, my God, who would've thought?

02-01:23:25

Farrell:

Yeah, it's particularly relevant right now. That was endorsed by both the ACLU and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund. Can you tell me a little bit about working with people to get that bill passed? Because it had to be a little bit challenging, right, to work with people?

02-01:23:51

Polanco:

Yeah. We have strong opposition from the Republicans, Jim Brulte being the minority leader at the time if I'm not mistaken. We had opposition from community colleges. Those that support the status quo to have district-wide elections were not happy with this bill, and so this bill right now is only touching the surface of school districts and cities. Wait till you get to the water districts, the irrigation districts because it's applicable to any political division that the state of California legislature creates where there is voting. A lot of it was timing as well, when do I bring it up, you know? This was brought up at the appropriate time if I'm not mistaken, late in the hour, on a late session. But we were able to get the kind of input and support. As you can see, it was all democratic vote straight up, and that was a huge victory, a huge victory for democracy and representation of government that is inclusive.

02-01:25:31

Farrell:

How did you know when the time was right to bring it up?

02-01:25:35

Polanco:

I scout around who's on the senate floor, I scout around who's in the canteen having chips or whatever, and it's [snaps fingers] move fast and I mean, yeah, you've got to put everything into the equation.

02-01:25:53

Farrell:

Okay, so you're monitoring what's happening in the atmosphere at that moment?

02-01:25:58

Polanco:

That's correct, yeah, right.

02-01:26:00

Farrell:

Got it, okay. That one was signed into law by Governor Davis on July 9, 2002, so another successful one. In correspondence with the committees, the subcommittees that you've been on, there were also a number of other issues

that you authored legislation for. We talked a little bit about mental health and health care related issues. One thing I know you worked on was gun control and worker protection, consumer protection, pets and puppy mill regulation, telecommunication, the environment, and desalinization, stronger environmental regulations, prison reform and you talked a little bit about that too with where things were being zoned. Is there anything that you want to highlight in some of the long list of things that you've been on that was of particular importance?

02-01:27:06

Polanco:

I think it's been covered. I do want to say that one, the performing arts and community arts historically, the California Arts Council historically, they were funding most of your San Francisco orchestra, the symphonies, yada, yada, yada, and Joanne Kozberg came to me and offered and asked if I would author a bill that would generate money to fund the arts council. I authored the license plate arts bill that generates millions and millions of dollars on the condition that it would not be earmarked only for the orchestras or it needed to go to communities. It needed to be a grant program where communities can tap into and do arts, et cetera, et cetera.

02-01:28:35

It has done very well. I'm really happy to have created revenue stream if you will. Again, I give credit to the individuals, Joanne Kozberg, she was agency secretary in the Wilson administration consumer affairs if I'm not mistaken, department of or the agency of consumer. Fabulous lady, we sit on the UCLA board of advisors for Luskin School of Public Affairs, and she's just great. I want to point to that.

02-01:29:18

I carried and did a lot of work for the Native Americans. I helped design their strategy for the Proposition 5 I believe or 1 and then 5. I was trying to author a constitutional amendment to put the issue on the ballot so that they wouldn't have to go and gather signatures. I realized that the unions, the racetracks, the card clubs, the pari-mutuels were way too strong back then. They were not as strong as they were—the Native American tribes are today and so I was not able to move my bill. I brought them in to give them message. It's time for them to close their operations for half a day, go get a permit from Los Angeles, have in front of the courthouse your rally. It just happened to coincide with the time that they were ready to close the casinos down because they claimed that it was the Cabazon decision had just come down and so the Cabazon decision was a decision that basically says, "Look, you can have these slot machines, and the reason why you can have these slot machines is because the inner workings are no different than that of what is used in the lottery's machines." When they went to the federal courthouse to meet with the US attorney like 3000 to 4000 individuals came to the rally. They had their workers, their distributors, their subcontractors, and all the chiefs were there, and they came out and everyone got to speak. I was the only elected official that was invited and allowed to speak. My daughter was four years

old, and I'm real proud of the history that I have in Indian country, and the rest is history. I mean they went and took it to the people, and the people supported them, and they're doing some phenomenal things now.

02-01:31:53

Farrell:

Yeah, also very relevant for today as well, yeah.

02-01:31:57

Polanco:

Yes, yes. I was looking at a couple of bills that the governor vetoed that I thought would be interesting. When we were doing obviously a lot of the citizenship, we wanted to create citizenship centers. I got the bill through the legislature only to have it vetoed in 1993, '94 session. The other was maglev high speed rail, high speed rail project. Mark Pisano executive director of SCAG, which is the regional organization brought a proposal that I thought made sense to build a maglev. We're building a high speed, but that bill cut out of the legislature and was defeated. In the area of water, we talked about desal, but I also reformed the composition of the metropolitan water district. I think they had fifty-eight members to thirty-seven or thirty-eight, which is today and I engaged there because of their resisting to desal. They were very political, and they were doing stuff politically that they should have been doing. The average age at the time, the average was like back then seventy-six years old. They would have two nurses available on the board meetings because of fear of illness or whatever. Anyway, water has been an area that unfortunately had we done desalination, all things considering, there are economies, countries that their entire economy is based on desal. It just didn't make a lot of sense for me not to advance a desal operation.

02-01:34:18

Farrell:

I do have a follow-up question on the bills being vetoed: what was it like for you to have bills vetoed?

02-01:34:28

Polanco:

It's not a good feeling. But I came across one that I was—the veto message, and it dealt with the immigrant issues. For the life of me, I'm trying to find the veto message; it was like really ugly. I think it was signed by the governor, Wilson but not written by him. In other words, staff is there. As I do my memoirs, I'm looking at stuff, and I came across that when I—and unfortunately, I couldn't find it.

02-01:35:19

Farrell:

Did having a bill vetoed, were there any bills that it made you want to work harder or it motivated you to try again or rewrite them or move forward in a different way?

02-01:35:37

Polanco:

Well, I want to say the issue of DACA—okay, in California AB540 is the bill that's like part of the DACA moment and that was introduced by Marco Firebaugh, and it's a bill that got signed into law. It was a bill that generates from Leticia A, a case that dealt with in-state tuitions for undocumented. I

remember I carried that particular bill and got it all the way through to have vetoed. I could have reintroduced it, but with Wilson, and I'm not sure, but that might be the veto message that he gave to the bill that I'm—you know, to the veto message that I saw, it may have been relating to that particular issue.

02-01:36:57

The problem wasn't getting legislation through the legislature back then, it was getting it signed into law. The DACA issue could have not been issue for California had these bills not been vetoed. You look back, and it takes time. I'm glad that I got to see undocumented children eligible for health care. I'm glad I got to see in California other pieces of legislation that introduced at an earlier time would not be signed into law. So it's great. I mean with all the challenges, even with all the challenges today that we see with all this craziness at the federal and national level in these crazy states, we got to stay strong, and we got to stay motivated, and we got to fight smart. We have to make sure that we not give up on democracy by not voting and not engaging. I mean it's real fundamental, there's no real magic to it, it's real fundamental and very, very critical and important.

02-01:38:30

Farrell:

Another thing I wanted to ask you about is that you were the senate majority leader from 1998 until 2002. What was your experience serving in that role, and maybe what were some of your biggest successes, biggest challenges?

02-01:38:47

Polanco:

It was interesting how I became majority leader. I advanced myself for president pro tem, John Burton advanced himself as president pro tem, and so we were both working collecting votes. There came the time when we both realized, hey, it's time for us to get together and let's talk. That time came, and we decided to have dinner at Il Fornaio. I decided to invite Martha Escutia. We walk in and Johnny's sitting there and Johnny says, "What's this about?" I said, "Johnny, it's good that we have a witness to whatever is going to come out of this," and he chuckled. He's always really respected and liked Martha and so we sat down, "Who do you have?" "I think I have this, well he told me this." Make a long story short, I agreed, "Look, I will accept getting myself out of the running for president pro tem with the understanding that I will become the senate majority leader," and that was the deal we cut. It's taken to the caucus, and the caucus, you're voted. It's not a done deal, but that's the recommendation, and your colleagues elect you to that. I think having the experience that I had in both the policy and the politics, it worked out.

02-01:40:52

The position at the time, we had Gray Davis and so it was a very influential position. I'd get the calls from the governor's office on certain things and then also assisting in getting votes for members' bills as well. I was not one who would be adverse to giving policy that I'm working on to another author to assist in the portfolio if you will. I'll share this story, I remember getting the call from Gray, it's the height when Cruz Bustamante and the governor are at odds, right, and the governor has taken the parking space away in the

basement from the speaker, right? It's getting pretty hairy; I mean it's getting really bizarre. Cruz is my roommate and Tony was my roommate and so I get the call and I'm asked by the governor's folks that "The governor would like to talk to you." I come down, and he was very, very, "Thank you so much, I need your help. We got to stop this Cruz Bustamante," and I go, "Yeah, yeah, it's really very foolish." He was asking for advice, "How do we break this?" because the media was just like feeding up.

02-01:42:34

He's got staff there, and I say to him, "Well, look, you've got to shift the media's attention. You have a vacancy of the health director for months, and you establish a woman's group to vet the candidates. The two top candidates, one happens to be Dr. Hernandez out of San Francisco and the other happens to be Diana Bonta out in Long Beach. For whatever reason the committee hasn't brought you the recommendations, make a decision." He says, "Okay." I said to the governor, "I've heard that Dr. Hernandez is not interested," so he said to staff, "Call Diana Bonta," and I said, "Whoa, whoa, slow down. Senator Ortiz, who is the chair of the health is convening committee." I advised the governor, "Have Deborah call Diana, you call Deborah, Deborah calls Diana to ensure that she'll accept the appointment, and it's ready to be offered, will she accept it?" You can see it on the screen, sergeant goes up, gives her, her note, comes around the daises, gets on the phone, the conversation takes place, and that's how Diana Bonte got her appointment, now the story begins to shift.

02-01:44:15

There was another request, there were two, I'm not sure if Maria Contreras Sweet, who I've known for a long time, was the second, but the third I made personal. I said to Gray, "Governor, this is a personal request. My friend who is like a brother to me, his name is Fred Fujioka, he and I worked the community for years. He is a defense attorney; he is a public defender." Now you have to remember, Gray would not appoint or move anyone for a judgeship who was a public defender or a defense attorney. It was just not going to happen. Make a long story short, I said, "I don't want you to appoint him, I want you to promise me you will interview him. If he gets out of [a qualified score for judicial appointment] and if you interview him, that's all I'm asking." "Okay, okay, I'll do that, I'll do that." Michael Yamaki, another dear friend of ours, both Fred and myself, is the governor's Legislative Secretary—or, yeah, legal, the person that handles these kinds of appointments.

02-01:45:39

Make a long story short, Fred goes through Ginnie Mae, highly qualified but doesn't have any law enforcement support. I summoned all the lobbyist that represent and bring them to my office, and I asked them, and I called Fred and I say, "Fred, come on up here, I'm going to set this meeting, they're going to interview you." I told the guys, the lobbyists, "Look, if you don't think he would be fair, then don't support him. But if you think he will be fair and just,

then I want a letter from the organization on his behalf." They did the interview, and they really liked him, they supported him. Make a long story short, I get a call from Michael telling me that the governor is going to make appointments. Fred is in the list, in the hopper, but Michael is not telling me that he's going to be one of them and so I become very upset and I used a lot of foul language. I said to Michael, "You know, I've carried a lot of water for the governor, I've been the go-to person, I seldom have ever asked for anything," and Michael says, "Oh, oh, okay, look, you say exactly what you said to me to Bert Pines because Bert Pines has the final say," and the same thing.

02-01:47:01

I'm driving, I get a call from my wife, and she said that "Fred's looking for you," goes, "He is? Everything okay?" goes, "Yeah. He asked me not to tell you, but I've got to tell you." "What's that?" "The governor appointed him judge so act surprised when he calls you." I'm driving, and my phone rings, and it's those big phones, right, back then. [laughs] I answered it, and I said, "Hello, who's this?" "This is Judge Fujioka." "Oh my, God," so I pull over. I mean we would drink beer growing up and do our wish thing, what are you going to be when you grow up, right? He would say a lawyer and ultimately a judge. I would say, "You know well, I'm going to be elected, and I want to help you then." That's a long-time brotherhood.

02-01:48:04

I guess what is it like to be in a position like that? I mean you can influence; you can make a difference. Yeah, nothing happens in the state quite honestly that doesn't get through that office. Your bond measure, the water bonds, the park bonds, all of that began to change how and who were eligible for those buckets. Inner urban parks now become real. There's so much there, so much opportunity, so much influence to bring good stuff into the forefront. I always say in the legislature, it's the best job in the world, and when you look at the amount of influence, it doesn't stop in California. I remember doing a bill, I was contacted by the legislator, senate majority leader of New Mexico legislature Manny Aragon. We were at a conference, and he approached me, he said, "Hey, Polanco, when are you guys going to stop colonizing us?" I go, "What?" "Yeah, colonizing." "What do you mean colonizing?" "Yeah."

02-01:49:32

Los Alamos Lab, unbeknownst to me, was managed and is managed by the UC system of California in a contract that they get from the department of energy. They're the grantee, they are the group, they're the entity that funds everything, the procurement, the staffing, you name it, right? The complaint was that ethnic minority, small business, MBE/WBEs, they were being left out, upward mobility, none whatsoever. That it was just unbearable and they did not know what to do. We convened hearings in New Mexico, and I brought the provost, invited him to come down, and he spent a day, two days, listened, went to the lab, yada, yada. Make a long story short, I introduced legislation that today, up to this day, the employees at Los Alamos are

covered under California State Person law. An example of the influence that California can have that goes beyond our borders, yeah.

02-01:51:01

Farrell:

Yeah, I mean California is kind of the bellwether state. Another thing that happened towards the end of your time in the Senate was 9/11. I'm wondering if you can tell me about how that tragedy impacted the Capitol and your work and the Latino caucus and if their priorities changed after that?

02-01:51:26

Polanco:

Well, I remember the morning it happened. I remember calling home and talking to Libby and I remember going to the Capitol, and I remember sergeants saying, "Everybody out." I remember Martha Escutia and I driving home from Sacramento that day. I remember coming down the five, and we talked about how what's going on. But that five-hour drive, there was talk about a lot of other stuff. I mean it was serious, but I think getting out into that long drive and being able to talk about not just what had occurred. It didn't stop us from or it didn't impact the Latino caucus. What it did is it really just beefed-up security matters and measures at the Capitol. I mean it was like, oh, my God, and to see it, the second plane hit, it was like, "Oh." I mean I can see it, I'm watching sitting there in the living room, wow, it was just unbelievable. How could this happen? How could this have happened? To see the devastation that came after, the falling down and the big cloud of ash and people—no, it was horrific, and it was scary, it was scary. I guess driving out in the open, we felt a little more secure than being downtown some place, but it did not hinder our work. We continued to operate, but it did change a lot of security, much like COVID-19. I mean it's a lot different today.

02-01:53:52

Farrell:

Let's see, let me scroll down for a second on this outline. You decided not to run for reelection in 2002 even though you were considered a favorite candidate. I'm wondering if you could tell me about that decision?

02-01:54:15

Polanco:

When I decided to not run for city council, it was a point in time that in my gut, I didn't have the fire in the belly. I've always advised candidates, "Don't get in this unless there's fire in the belly, unless you really want it." As I began to talk to folks, the fire in the belly was not there. I had also made a promise to my family that I would build the family financial nest egg, that I would put together and secure so that if and when my time comes to cross over and go to the other side, that my family is financially well and that means not just Libby, my son, my daughter, my grandkids. When I did not feel that fire in the belly, I had had two elections already, it was just for me, it was not there. I would not once again want to put my family in the public eye given a situation that caused great dishonor to my family. It was not worth for me having to go through that or put my family through that.

02-01:56:33

When I termed out of office, we had commissioned that last year a strategic five-year plan for a strategic five-year plan for the caucus. One of those was to create a nonprofit institute called the Latino Caucus Institute. We had my dinner, we raised over \$600,000, paid the debt, and we established a fellows program. The caucus named it after my family's name, Polanco Fellows. These are college grads, one year fully stipend, doing public policy in the building for nine months and three months in there in the executive branch. We graduated forty-two, Rudy Salas, Assemblyman Rudy Salas is of the first class. We also ran a program that dealt with the training of newly elected officials not how to run for office, but I got elected, what do I now? We did about 382 graduates up and down the state, and at the same time, opened a lobbying firm where *tres e's* meaning three e's, education, environment, and energy, and the book of business had been primarily in that particular arena. I continue to engage politically and I have an amicus brief letter in support of the voting rights act in Santa Monica. I stay active and life is good.

02-01:58:37

Farrell:

Why was it important for you to create the fellowship program that was in your name?

02-01:58:43

Polanco:

It was important because the electors come and go. Given term limits, it was more important to institutionalize inside the presence of our community, and we did that, some are chiefs of staff, some are committee consultants, some are on our schoolboards. It was important to have a presence because when I looked at that fellows program, the assembly fellows, and the senate fellows, you could count the number of Latinos, Latinas who had gone through the program in one or two hands. To me, the value of that experience and the process that we put them through to get selected, it's a rigorous process. It's like applying to college to get accepted to a school. It was important that we have an ongoing presence in the building, in those committees' offices, which we intended to do which we done. Today, you walk through the halls of Sacramento, and it's just not Latinos, it's Asians, Latinos, it's a diverse group of workers, the workforce.

02-02:00:12

They stay for years to come, and that's important because prior to the new term limit that are now existing, prior to that, every six years or every eight years, people were coming and going. The institution memory went to the third house, and in many instances, it's still there. It was about not only institutionalizing our community's presence but our community's experience. To legislate prior to having the input of women to the degree we have them now in Latinos, gay, and lesbian community, it really legislating from one perspective. Now, the sausage when it's getting made has the input and ingredients from everywhere, and to me, that's a much better way of doing public policy. It's just not to get somebody there because of the color of the skin. It's to get somebody there that is going to make a difference, that cares,

and will bring that experience into the policy discussion. You've got to be at the table, and if you're not at the table, you're not going to be heard.

02-02:01:38

Farrell:

What are some of the things that you're most proud of during your time as an elected official?

02-02:01:46

Polanco:

Some of the things that I'm most proud of, I think it's the legacy of being able to build a Latino caucus is certainly one. The voting rights acts, it is certainly another, the impact that it continues to have, especially in this day and age. I look in the area of health care that was what was created and able to do with the hospice care and AIDS and HIV. How we outreach to those that were totally disenfranchised and being scapegoated, the immigrant population, what's really rewarding is after I left office and I'd show up to a banquet or to wherever there would be workers of sort, and to walk in and have them say your name and acknowledge you, "Senor Polanco," was a real eye-opener. At the same time, walking out of events, a couple of times in my years of serving, in a tuxedo or a suit, and being handed the keys to park a car, [laughs] over at—oh God, I forget the name of the big hotel down in—interesting Century Hotel. When that happened, I just couldn't believe it. It was like, oh, my God, maybe I should take it. [laughs] Oh, I'm sorry. There you go.

02-02:04:06

I think the ban on Saturday night specials, that took like two sessions, and finally, we were able to get those cheap guns that were manufactured in Orange County among the five companies. That action was brought to me by parents who had a son that were victims; they had a family member killed. These guns were showing up in New York and Chicago, everywhere. You could buy them for twenty-five bucks. You drive around and in the community and you see stuff. Community guard was at the local elementary schools, we used to do a lot of that. Pass by Eagle Rock High School, and we raised \$20,000 to send the band to play at President Clinton's inauguration.

02-02:05:35

Farrell:

Yeah, so you can see your fingerprints in different parts of your districts in LA. You mentioned one of the things that you're most proud of is your work on the Latino caucus, and I'm wondering what your hopes for the future of the caucus is?

02-02:05:55

Polanco:

Well, the caucus is going to continue to grow given the demographics, number one. As it grows, the issues are going to be important to tackle. The fact that there is so much prejudice and bigotry against Latinos and immigrants, there needs to be a way to educate and inform the other communities of the contributions that had been made through the legislative process, through military service. The story, I mean I've been toying with this as I'm writing some memoirs, is like why do you fear us, why do you scapegoat us? What is

it about us that you think gives you the right to do and abuse and accuse people who look like me when we can point to public policy that is to your best interest as well as to mine? There's just this huge gap.

02-02:07:33

To your question, where does the caucus need to be or some of the things they need to look at? I think there's more work to be done in the areas of telling our story and the contributions. We get to frame that; social media is a mechanism that is out there. It shouldn't be framed for us. I think when it comes to the immigrant professional who's licensed, who can't practice in California, that to me should be addressed, can be addressed so that they not only are trained equivalent to the California standards in those professions, but they become a taxpayer that's going to give more in tax revenue to the coffers. It's like not looking at them as a drain, looking at them as an opportunity to advance them so that they can contribute more. Those would be frontiers that I think advising the caucus to begin to explore. Too many professional licensed immigrants are doing dishwashing and other kinds of—not to demean that but they have been trained, and there's just this resistance that I find with some of the professions.

02-02:09:26

Farrell:

Yeah, I think you're right. I think there's a lot of that when you have a position in your country and then you emigrate and then it's like downward mobility. But instead the idea from what I'm hearing you're saying is that idea of rising tide lifts all boats?

02-02:09:51

Polanco:

Yes, absolutely, absolutely. You said it so well, rising tides do lift all boats. I think there are like 300,000 professionals, licensed, professional abroad, what would it take to create a two-year curriculum to bring them and create equivalent standards? Why are we not doing that for nurses, for dentists? I mean the need is there. That could another project of mine.

02-02:10:33

Farrell:

Well, maybe we've just planted the seeds. [laughter] My last question for you is what advice would you give to young people who are just starting out and wanting to get involved in politics?

02-02:10:47

Polanco:

Don't be afraid and don't let fear interfere. Don't let your circumstances hold you back. Own up to them, own them, and then move forward. You cannot stop believing in yourself because the minute you do, other people see no reason to believe in you. It's so easy to let the little guy here talk to you and create a situation where you're paralyzed, and it doesn't have to be that way, it really doesn't. You get to be senior to whatever the circumstances are, and you get to do that by owning all of that and saying, "Okay, this is what I get to do going forward, this is what I get to be." Really it's about never losing your passion. It's about finding it and never losing it, and you can't find it and you

can't lose it if you're full of fear. Stay active, give back to your community. If you're interested in politics, start with volunteering. Do things so that you can go to people when you're asking them to support you that these are the things I've done in the community. I can do more given the opportunity.

02-02:12:50

That goes people from all walks of life, that goes to people. We've talked a lot about the Latino influence, but I have probably been one of the most prolific supporters of women in—to get into politics by supporting them than any other member that I can think of. My support of women is very strong and, it's important because I believe women come to the debate differently. They have a whole different perspective, and their challenges are a lot different and they have more challenges, but yet, I find them to be more loyal, I find them to be not as kneejerk if you will. I guess my life upbringing I've been around strong women, and I have seen the greatness that many of them women bring.

02-02:14:08

Farrell:

Is there anything else that you want to add before we wrap up?

02-02:14:18

Polanco:

I think we covered a lot. Yeah, no, I think I'm good.

02-02:14:23

Farrell:

Okay, great.

02-02:14:24

Polanco:

I'm good.

02-02:14:24

Farrell:

Well, thank you so much for all of this. It's really wonderful to hear your perspective join all of this and have your voice on the record, so thank you so much for your time, I really appreciate it.

02-02:14:36

Polanco:

You are very welcome, and the release form was in the mail yesterday.

[End of Interview]