



CSRC  
ORAL HISTORIES SERIES

NO. 15, JULY 2014

# LEONARD CASTELLANOS

INTERVIEWED BY KAREN MARY DAVALOS

ON OCTOBER 15, 2011

Artist and graphic designer Leonard Castellanos co-founded the Mechicano Art Center and was its director from 1971 to 1978. The center was well known for its silk-screen program, and it had one of the earliest public art programs in Los Angeles. Castellanos, who lives in Los Angeles, received his BFA from Chouinard Art Institute and his MFA from California State University, Los Angeles.

Karen Mary Davalos is chair and professor of Chicana/o studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. Her research interests encompass representational practices, including art exhibition and collection; vernacular performance; spirituality; feminist scholarship and epistemologies; and oral history. Among her publications are *Yolanda M. López* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2008); "The Mexican Museum of San Francisco: A Brief History with an Interpretive Analysis," in *The Mexican Museum of San Francisco Papers, 1971–2006* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2010); and *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

This interview was conducted as part of the L.A. Xicano project.

Preferred citation: Leonard Castellanos, interview with Karen Mary Davalos, October 15, 2011, Los Angeles, California. CSRC Oral Histories Series, no. 15.  
Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2014.

CSRC Oral Histories Series © 2014 Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved.  
Interview © 2011 Leonard Castellanos. Do not reproduce without permission.

---

---

## THE CSRC ORAL HISTORIES SERIES

The CSRC Oral Histories Series publishes the life narratives of prominent Chicano and Latino figures. The life narratives have been recorded and transcribed, and the interviewer and interviewee have reviewed and corrected the transcriptions prior to publication. These oral histories are often undertaken as part of a larger research project and in tandem with archival collections and library holdings.

---

---

## CSRC ORAL HISTORY SERIES PROJECTS

**L.A. Xicano** documents the history of Chicana/o art in Los Angeles with a focus on artists, collectives, and art organizations. The project resulted in new museum and library exhibitions, public programs, archival collections, and scholarly publications. These efforts were part of the Getty Foundation initiative Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945–1980. The project received support from Getty Foundation, Annenberg Foundation, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and California Community Foundation. Related support includes funding from Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, AltaMed Health Services Corporation, Entravision Communications Corporation, Walt Disney Company, and individual donors.

**A Ver: Revisioning Art History** stems from the conviction that individual artists and their coherent bodies of work are the foundation for a meaningful and diverse art history. This book series explores the cultural, aesthetic, and historical contributions of Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and other U.S. Latino artists. The A Ver project is made possible through the generous support of Getty Foundation, Ford Foundation, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Joan Mitchell Foundation, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, and The Rockefeller Foundation.

**The LGBT and Mujeres Initiative** seeks to increase archival and oral history holdings that document the Chicano/Latino presence in LGBT and women’s histories, the role of women and LGBT people in Chicano/Latino histories, and the importance of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in “mainstream” scholarly research and archival institutions. The project receives generous support from the Ford Foundation and individual donors.

---

---

## ARTISTS INTERVIEWED FOR THE L.A. XICANO PROJECT

Judy Baca  
Charles “Chaz” Bojórquez  
David Botello  
Barbara Carrasco  
Leonard Castellanos  
Roberto “Tito” Delgado  
Richard Duardo  
Margaret Garcia  
Johnny Gonzalez  
Judithe Hernández  
Leo Limón  
Gilbert “Magu” Luján  
Monica Palacios  
John Valadez  
Linda Vallejo

# INTERVIEW WITH LEONARD CASTELLANOS

OCTOBER 15, 2011

**Karen Mary Davalos:** This is Karen Davalos and today is October 15, 2011, and I am here at Avenue 50 Studio with Leonard Castellanos for the [CSRC Oral Histories Series]. We are hoping that this is the beginning of an oral history interview, but today we are just going to do about ninety minutes of talking, Leonard, about how you got started in arts in Los Angeles. I understand that you are attending Chouinard [Art] Institute.

**Leonard Castellanos:** That is correct.

**KD:** On scholarship.

**LC:** That is correct.

**KD:** And how did you get that scholarship?

**LC:** Originally from high school. I had an excellent instructor by the name of David Ramirez [when I] was in junior high school, from the seventh to the ninth grade. And then when I transferred to Garfield he also happened to transfer at the same time. So actually he was there from the eighth to the twelfth grade, or ninth to the twelfth grade, and so it was auspicious timing in the sense that he was my instructor for basically six years.

**KD:** Yeah?

**LC:** And he was very advanced in his approach to teaching art in high school. He had me read material that was college-age material, like *Principles of Art History* [and other] stuff, so forth and so on.

**KD:** Really? Can you remember some of the stuff that he had you read?

**LC:** Well, it was basically—it was about composition. It was a book that really gave you an overview of art in the sense of interpretation and meaning of art—composition, color, you name it. It was in this small book, which was excellent. I still have it until this day, in fact, on my bookshelf. The other one that we studied was anatomy, advanced anatomy with him. [We] learned all of the structure in the bones and the body, so forth and so on, which lead to his theory [of] how to approach draftsmanship and the fine art of drawing, not in a technical, rigid way, but he believed that the lines of the body were—that the body itself was designed a certain way, and therefore if you approached it in a true way, from within, that you learned to draw in a natural way. He did not believe in using superficial or structural lines that lead to rigidity or definition of the body in an unnatural way. Again, easier said than done, and what I am saying may lead to confusion more than clarification, but this was his approach.

**KD:** So he is not making you do contour drawing or he is making you?

**LC:** Well, that was part of it, but he did not rely on contour drawing. [What] he used was what he called the flow of the contour lines—not exterior, but the interior flow of the body.

**KD:** Wow.

**LC:** That nothing was—nothing was ever . . . The human body did not have straight lines in it, so therefore in learning the flow of the body you learned what he called “the gesture.” In studying the gesture of the body, then, it leads you to a derived meaning within the body to learn to draw it. But the contour line was the superficial aspect of the drawing. In other words, whatever you see, you know, you go to drawing. [This] was not his approach. His approach was to draw from within and go out.

**KD:** Wow.

**LC:** And in doing that, [that] led to the revelation of the secrets of the human body, and with anything that you want to [draw], whether it was an animal, or a chair, or whatever else. Which, in approaching education [at schools] such as Otis Art Institute—also Chouinard—melded very well with me being accepted there. Because, again, it was an advanced way of approaching drawing which was applied by Chouinard artists. For instance, [by] some of the instructors there. So when I started, when I started as a student there, I was

knowledgeable in ways that were already being taught, and that helped me out a great deal to accelerate my arts. And, again, I [had to] apply every year. You have to apply for a scholarship, a grant, and it wasn't given to you automatically. Even if you had a grant, you had to apply and earn it for that year. So you might get it one year, but it doesn't mean you are going to get [it the] next year, see. But I was fortunate enough to receive a scholarship for four consecutive years. And then when I graduated I got a postgraduate grant to teach. And so I taught a summer there before I went on to my master's program at [California State University,] Los Angeles.

**KD:** So tell me about the kinds of work that you were doing at this early period, from high school and at Chouinard. Was it figurative, or were you doing other kinds of work?

**LC:** It was figurative, but there was a lot of experimentation. David Ramirez encouraged experimentation, but within the guidelines that he was teaching, so that it would create a solid base for you as a student of life and art. Not just, you know . . . The way that he approached drawing is that it is forever. It wasn't, you know, you do it for six months and then you are an artist. It was a forever quest, an exploration in the beauty of art and your application of it. And understanding these principles taught you to see everything differently and examine it differently in the sense of an artist. So, it gave you that wonder and awe of how he was approaching things new and fresh. As I said, it wasn't meant for you to learn and then forget about it. It was meant as principles that you sit down and learn and of course ever expanded with your practice as an artist and also your application of it, as in doing and applying these principles in creating art, drawing, painting. They apply to everything, so it wasn't really figurative, yet it was.

**KD:** Okay.

**LC:** Because these principles can be applied to everything, including, of course, the basics of [the] human body. Life drawing was his great forte. He definitely took it to another level, such as Renaissance artist—

**KD:** Yeah.

**LC:** Michelangelo. Leonardo da Vinci. And these principles that were taught [then], and [are] still taught today in some areas of the globe, apply always to art. They never end. Like I said, [the] Renaissance was the Renaissance, but we still study those principles of drawing and art to this day.

**KD:** So who were you studying with at [Chouinard] Art Institute?

**LC:** Well, you studied with everybody that was there, depending on the field that you—

**KD:** I guess I am wondering who—was there anybody who influenced you, like David did?

**LC:** Russian arts, fortunately, had the great instructors. They were practicing artists, they weren't just teachers—

**KD:** Right.

**LC:** That don't practice their art. The instructors at the Chouinard Institute were living, practicing artists in their own right. Such as Emerson Wolf, or Connor Everts, Donald Graham. Donald Graham was a great master draftsman who took me under his wing when I entered Chouinard, as David Ramirez did when I was at public school. He also encouraged me to visit him in his residence to give me more advanced lessons in drawing and draftsmanship. Donald Graham was great. He worked for Walt Disney as a master draftsman, and he created the motion for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. That was all hand animation. It is really amazing when you look at that, and this was pre-computer days. Anyway, he created the basic principles for animation for Walt Disney and he taught at Chouinard Art Institute. He took drawing to another level and created motion in drawing. By understanding the principles that were taught to me by David Ramirez, for instance, he then took these principles and created motion in the human body just by applying certain principles to the formulas of draftsmanship, which was an amazing thing itself. And so there were many great artists that influenced me while I was at Chouinard, because they all had something magical to offer in their knowledge and practice of art.

**KD:** So you get your BFA and then you are hired, I understand, to do assistant printmaking at—

**LC:** Correct.

- KD:** At Chouinard, but also at . . . No, then you go on to Cal State. So you work for, like, a quarter, [or] a semester, or whatever it is. I guess it's a quarter in printmaking. Was that your emphasis, or did you have to take an emphasis for the BFA?
- LC:** You could. I was pretty well rounded. Because of my basis in draftsmanship, I was equally involved in painting and printmaking and sculpturing. So I enjoyed all of them, and I was happy and lucky enough to have a curriculum that was well rounded, whereas if you wanted to, you could focus on one area and concentrate on that. But since I enjoyed all of them, I had equal opportunity within the classes I studied. And the instructors, they understand that because they are artists. So they didn't give me limits. If you wanted to expand, that [was] your business as a student. If you could handle it, they allowed you to, and they encouraged it. And if you wanted to focus a little more and, say, concentrate on sculpture or printmaking as your sole major, then you could do that, too. So that was the great benefit of that school, the Chouinard Art Institute.
- KD:** So you go on to Cal State LA in the MFA program there.
- LC:** Right.
- KD:** And what was their emphasis at that time?
- LC:** Well, I didn't have much money. I got married when I was eighteen, so I had limitations, financial limitations as to [my life situation]. If I wasn't on a scholarship then I probably couldn't have continued my education. What I did was, Connor Everts set up a meeting with Leonard Edmondson who was the head of the art department at Cal State LA, and he was a master printmaker. I believed that he is deceased now. He agreed to bring me in as an assistant instructor because of my extensive background in printmaking with Connor Everts and Kinji Akagawa and Joe Funk, who set up Tamarind press. [Joe Funk was a printer fellow at Tamarind Lithography Workshop—ed.] I was working with all of [them] as a student, which was a great thing because I was printing with master printmakers and getting the experience, but also printing their work. They wouldn't allow anybody to print their work unless [they thought] that you were really—you knew enough to print for them.
- KD:** Yeah.
- LC:** You would print and they would encourage you, of course, because they guided you this way, but to print for them was another matter. But I printed for them, and worked with them very closely. We would go into three- or four-day printing sessions at Everts's studio, when he had a whole workshop there in lithography and intaglio. And we would print for three or four days at a time without stopping. So, with that experience behind me, Leonard Edmondson took me under his wing and made me an assistant to him in the printmaking workshop at Cal State LA. And with that strength behind me—and with that I was able to diversify my classes, to concentrate on what I wanted to. So again Leonard Edmondson took the ball and gave me the same freedom that I had at Chouinard. And it was harder to do at Cal State because when you go to a school like Cal State, the rigidity and—there was a lot of rigidity in taking classes. You have to major, you know, that kind of stuff. Well, Leonard Edmondson, because I was working so close with him in the art department, I was an integral part of the art department by then, I was kind of like a student teacher—
- KD:** Yeah, I would imagine.
- LC:** For all the time that I was in my master's [program]. With that flexibility he gave me—and again, I was able to continue draftsmanship and working in other areas in the arts. In working in those areas I then started taking courses in the industrial arts area, which was the first time [this was] ever done at the Cal State LA level, in a master's program. I wasn't getting credit for—they wouldn't give me credit for the industrial arts courses because I was a fine art major, see? But I took them anyway, and it took me three and a half years to get my master's rather than two, because of that reason. But what I did was I went into metal casting. So I went to industrial arts. See, the art department didn't have a metal casting facility. They saw it strictly as an industrial arts course.
- KD:** Right.

LC: Well, I saw it as art. So in doing that, again—[and] having excellent grades and the background that I did—it was hard for them to deny me going into industrial arts. They tried to come up with reasons, the industrial arts department. They said, “Well, he’s an art major. We don’t have art majors in industrial arts.” Well, it broke the rigidity of their classes. I, as an art student, treated my industrial art courses like art classes, and that kind of upset them a little bit. It upset their agendas because they had students who were industrial arts majors and they had to accomplish, say, three or four projects within a certain period of time. Industrial arts projects—very technical stuff. Well, I learned.

So I made a deal with them. I said, “I’ll tell you what, I will come to class and learn all your technical [stuff], but I will also do my art.” So they said, “Well, how can we say no, then?” As long as you met the criteria. And I was still able to do art. They thought that was interesting, and they didn’t know if that was possible because [there] was a lot of weight behind that. Well, I did. I went to the classes. I accomplished the industrial arts area of understanding the compositions of metals, of making molds, casting bronze, casting Styrofoam, casting plaster, casting sand. And then what I did was to learn to understand what I needed to do in the arts. I then located a foundry outside of school. So I went to the foundry and asked them if I could participate as a student and learn the techniques straight from the foundry, and they said, “Well, we’ve never been asked before, but we will soon find out.”

So then I started developing art objects—meaning my art—in the foundry. And I went to the director of industrial arts in the school and I told them, “Can I get credit for this from you?”—meaning I would have to lose class time to do the real thing—and the instructor said, “Wow, that’s great, nobody has ever done that before.” So they approved it, and I was able to do both. I was able to work in the foundry and to learn the reality—that’s real life experience there—and then also keep my classes going. And of course whatever I learned there really helped me in my classes. So I advanced way beyond the average student doing the technical aspect of the test. And so they couldn’t say no because I was actually doing three times more than the average student in the industrial arts by doing what I was doing. And what I was doing [was] art. So they said okay, and it went well. I got excellent grades and was able to do that, and I continued that until I graduated.

And in fact, my master’s thesis at—when I graduated from Cal State LA—was in sculpture. It was what I called a modular spatial arrangement. What I did was, I created boxes that were eighteen by eighteen inches out of wood, and I painted them. I gave them a fine finish. I made modular boxes out of wood, primed them, painted them, sealed them, and made them almost glass-like surfaces. And this was in paint.

KD: You used paint to make them look like glass?

LC: Right, after finishing the surfaces. So I would accept the paint and then finally finish [the boxes] like glass, but they were made out of wood. So I then cut out shapes. I integrated shapes in these modular forms, and I made something like thirty or forty of them, okay? And they were finally finished. They were sprayed. I didn’t paint them with brush. I cut out shapes with masking tape and wax paper—because paint will not stick to wax paper—and I overlapped. And whatever the shapes that I was working on, on these modular three-dimensional forms, I painted them. So as I turned them, I painted them. And I did that to all of them. I turned them, and I painted them, and I created all these shapes within shapes within shapes. And you could put them on a table, you could build them, you could [have] them isolated by themselves. They worked in an infinite combination, and that was the whole concept behind the sculpture.

KD: That sounds wonderful.

LC: Yeah, I don’t have any of them left. I don’t know what happened to them.

KD: Did you sell them all?

LC: What’s that?

KD: Did you sell them all?

LC: No, I never sold them. I gave them away, or lost them.

KD: I thought that I had a review of a show that described that, but this is not it.

- LC: They have it on file at the library, as they do most of the master's theses. It was an environmental modular arrangement that was infinite, okay? By creating forty forms with each side, you could, literally, randomly arrange them and never do the same thing twice. For the rest of your life. *[laughter]*
- KD: That sounds wonderful. I know that there is a show that described these glass-like boxes. I don't think that they knew they were made from wood. I will have to find it.
- LC: Yeah, well, nobody knew that they were really made from wood because I had sanded and sealed them so well that when you looked at them they looked like glass. Painted glass, but they were wood. Painted with enamel paint.
- KD: Were you participating in the California Space and Light, Light and Space . . . What is it called? I always forget the term. *[California Light and Space Movement—ed.]* But the people that were working in Plexiglass—
- LC: I also worked in Plexiglass, but most of my projects were made on my own. I made these in a studio that I built in a house that I rented near the university. And nobody ever saw them until it was time to reveal them. I had critique from various instructors, Edmondson and other teachers who were then there at Cal State, which you have to do to show that you are progressing. You know, "Okay, what have you done in the last six months?" "Oh, no, nothing." Which wasn't the case. I am just exaggerating it, but there were many students *[who would say]*, "Oh, you know, nothing." I am thinking, "Man . . ." You know.
- KD: So, you picked up your degree in '68.
- LC: Nineteen sixty-eight. June of 1968 I completed my degree.
- KD: And you go directly *[from]* there to TELACU *[The East Los Angeles Community Union]*, or . . .
- LC: No, I had attended college and worked part time in the evening every day. I worked seven days a week. As I said, I had a family and it was very difficult for me financially to make it. If I hadn't received assistance from the school, and so forth and so on, I probably would have dropped out of school—college. Not because I wanted to, but because of financial —the lack of financial means, you know. To develop a financial base, Connor Everts and I formed a small company called C&C Press Recovery Company.
- KD: What is that?
- LC: I will tell you. One day I was talking to Connor Everts, who then, by that time, was now my friend. He was my mentor, he was my teacher, and right now I had graduated. But he comes to see me often, and we see each other. We get along very well. *[I'm]* still printmaking with him and the other guys in his home or studio, with Joe Funk, whatever. One day I am talking to him and I am saying, "You know I am really having a hard time making money to support my family. I don't know what I am going to do." I never wanted to quit school, because I knew—well, everybody says, "Well, I will quit for a year." Well, if you do that, you never go back. It's a death sentence, and I knew that intuitively in my gut, and I was trying to hang on as hard as I could. I was—I never slept, I rarely ate.
- KD: That's what I am imagining.
- LC: I was beating myself to death. Connor and I were sitting there, and Connor said, "You know, *[there are]* schools that have old presses that are not being used," he says. Because nobody knows where the parts are and they didn't make presses for parts, because they are heavy-duty cast iron and steel. Presses that had these big gears, but once they broke that was it. You could have a perfect press with a broken gear that sat there for twenty years in some university cellar or storage unit.

Well, Cal State LA had such a press that was broken. Nobody could fix it. They tried. They even tried to make the parts, but there was no such thing, they didn't have the same pressure, they didn't have the continuity. It would randomly adjust so it could easily possibly break a stone or whatever. Sometimes *[it's]* too tight. If your paper is too tight the rollover—the zinc plate—would stick because *[of]* the paper, *[and]* if it sticks to the ink because you have to wet your paper, and so forth and so on. So C&C Press Recovery was that we would go out and fix these presses for universities. And we never . . . And nobody knew, like I said, nobody had any information on these old presses. So we formed a little company between Connor and I

called C&C Press Recovery Company. We made a few letterheads and it looked pretty crude, but it looked arty. It was just put together between he and I on a table. And now we had a company.

So, I went to Leonard Edmondson that following Monday or so and told him, “Hey, Connor and I formed a little company,” and he said, “Well, we have that press back there . . .” “What if I fix it?” He had these big bushy eyebrows and he was looking at me, he always looked at you like this, because of his glasses. You know, a typical university guy. And the guy was a genius. It’s funny. The guy was a genius, a very quiet man. You’d never know. He would sit there sometimes—like this—and think. Like Einstein. He would be sitting there and everybody would [be] saying, “Who is this guy?” “He’s the head of the art department.” “Oh, excuse me. Oh, sir, oh, hi, hi,” you know. Great guy. I am not making fun of him. I am just saying, so eccentric, a beautiful man.

Anyway, I went to him, so eccentric, and I approached him with this idea. He looks at me and he goes, “If you can fix the damn thing.” He says, “Give me a price or whatever, and I will submit it to the, you know, committee.” And so he went to [the] committee and he said, “Leonard Castellanos can fix this press and he can make an aquatint box,” which they needed, and nobody had made. They had an old system of putting rosin on plates, [using] stocking.

KD: Oh really.

LC: It was a woman’s stocking and they would wrap it up and put rosin in it. And if this was the plate, you know, you brought the plate over, and you got the stocking, and you dabbed [at] it from a distance. If you want it really light, then you go up here. If you want it closer . . . But you never go out of perfectly smooth because you were dabbing.

KD: Right.

LC: And when you cook it, the rosin would melt, adhere to the plate and make a texture.

KD: Right.

LC: And when you would put that in the acid, the acid would eat the exposed part of the plate, and where the rosin was it would not take.

KD: Yeah.

LC: Right? So it would create a texture. Maybe those areas [are] really rough, maybe this is very, very fine. And it would give you tonality in your printing process and then . . . Of course, if you use lines and [an] etching tool, then fine. That was the process of it. So one day I was home because Leonard Edmondson said, “Well if you can fix old presses,” he said, “how about making me an aquatint box?” I said, “Well, how do you make an aquatint box?” He said, “I don’t know.” He says, “Figure it out.” That’s the way these guys were. They were great. They were geniuses. But, you know, they inspired me to do things. “I don’t know, figure it out. Can you do it?” I said, “I’ll figure it out.” So I studied—I already knew about the process.

KD: Right.

LC: But I studied. I went back to ancient times, when—

KD: Exactly.

LC: And how artists [do it]. And I would study artists. I would look at the plates, you know, the colored plates in books, and I would study the textures. You know, how did they ever make this tonal so even? They didn’t have machines, you know. And I studied that. So I took [notes], and I wrote down the tonal differences of masters—of course, in books—and I designed these aquatint boxes. What it was, was a very simple thing. I bought a little motor that you’d press. And the motor would go *wheee*, you know, and for that instant it would run, but it wouldn’t stay on.

KD: Right.

LC: You didn’t want it to stay on. There wasn’t a switch to turn on. And then you turned [it] on. It had to be instant. It couldn’t linger. And depending on how long or how many times you pressed this . . . What it was, [was that] I made an upside down pyramid, and then I put a shelf on the top, like a hotdog rack.

KD: Yeah.



LC: You know. And it had a little door. And you put the plate in there. And the rosin, that was down here at the bottom of the pyramid with a small conduit for the motor to blow in there. It was just a little miniature motor with a blower in there. And so when you pressed it, *boom*, it blew. It exploded the rosin up into the upper chamber of the machine and would coat your plate.

KD: Right.

LC: So it depends on how long you held it. And you had to play with it, but you had to actually, you got an even coat—

KD: Even coat.

LC: Of, of that rosin. It worked, you know. So it blew him away. Because when he saw it, he was all excited. It was like an upside down pyramid. It was very technically [simple], it wasn't covered over, it wasn't made to look—it was just a machine. It was very simple, but he loved that, see. It looked like a da Vinci machine. He loved that. When I brought it in to show it to him, he got the class and all the instructors came to the printmaking shop, and I carted it upstairs. I had some students help me, and we put it in the middle of the classroom there and brought an extension cord. And he is looking at it—you know, Leonard Edmondson—and he is looking at it. And he goes, "What the hell is that?" "Leonard," I said, "that's the aquatint box." "Well," he said, "well that's interesting." He goes, "So plug it in. I mean, work it."

So I did the experiment. I got the plate and—without any rosin, now—I put it in there. And he is looking at it, and he goes, "Well you didn't put any rosin on the plate." And I said, "Well, you don't have to. You don't touch it." I said, "The machine does it." "So," he said, "well what did you do?" I plugged it in and I said, "You press this little button." And I already had rosin. And I told him how I put the rosin in there already. "You just put a handful and throw it in there. You know, there is a little base in there." So everybody, all the students, everybody is looking at it. And he says, "Well, is it going to work?" And I said, "Yeah." So then I hit the machine and you know, *vroom*, and everybody is looking at it, and he said . . . And so I said, "Pull out the plate." So a student pulled out the plate very carefully and it had a coating of—a perfect coating of rosin on it. And he was like, "Ohhhh." And it was like a great moment in my life. That was great. Anyway, we developed [the] C&C Press Recovery Company. I then took [the] press. It had a broken gear—it had a big, ancient broken gear and a part that was missing. They broke gear and then the part, so nobody ever knew where it was. But I had most of the gear, so I took it to the foundry—

KD: The foundry.

LC: The foundry, where I was working with . . . And I took it to the guys down there and I told them that I wanted to cast this. And [they said,] "Great." So I made my own sand mold, and I put the gear in there, and then I turned it, and that was it. And I put my top on there, the top part of my sand mold, put the screws in there so the gases and everything would leak out, and I poured it and that was my first job, see. Well, the gear came out perfect. Sanded it, filed it. There it was, it was a perfect gear. And it even had the little niche in there that slides in and you put a lock and stuff. And they couldn't believe it. Nobody ever thought of it, and it was so simple. And it worked. So then I took the gear and there was—and I had to [take the] press apart. And I rebuilt it. I put a Benelux bed on it.

KD: I am not going to know what that is.

LC: It's a rubber—it's a hard rubber, about a quarter-inch, that you put the stone on.

KD: Okay.

LC: So when you run a press—

KD: Right.

LC: It doesn't break the stone. Of course you never really want to put that much pressure, but you are dealing with students, they don't know.

KD: They don't know.

LC: They have no experience. And you can tell them a thousand times, but it takes practice to understand how to work these old presses, see. Anyway, I rebuilt it, and I left that old gear out and everything. And I left it out so that, again, here comes Edmondson. He says, "So, you got a gear?" And I said, "Yeah, I made this

gear.” And he says, “You made the gear.” And I said, “Yeah, I went to the foundry and I poured it.” And he said, “That’s fucking amazing,” he says, you know. And it’s so simple to, you know—all these things that I am doing are so simple and practical.

KD: Yeah, actually my uncle and my grandfather did that for a living.

LC: Yeah—

KD: He was a machinist. He made those parts.

LC: Yeah, this was cast as close as I could to the original, and of course I machined it myself with a file. That’s all. I filed all the rough areas and the inside, you know. So I put the gear on it, and I go over there and he is looking, and I slide the gear in and I put the key in it and tap it in, so it would be nice and tight. And I turned the handle, and put a stone on it and ran it through and ran it back. And it was perfect. Perfectly balanced. He loved that press so much that he even forgot about—because we *had* a machine press.

KD: Right.

LC: Where you again use a lever and—

KD: Right.

LC: And you run it up to a certain point. Well, this was a hand press, you know, and he loved it so much that he didn’t use the machine anymore. He was using the old press all the time. *[laughter]* But anyway, so I started making—and made money to complement what I needed to pay my education, so forth and so on. The school helped because I was a part-time instructor. Even though I was a student.

KD: Right.

LC: But I was a unique student.

KD: Right.

LC: With the background that I had, they couldn’t argue with my credentials, see. I wasn’t a student coming in [and] not knowing anything. I was helping students learn the process of printmaking. And so Leonard Edmondson approached the finance committee and said, “You know, we can’t have this guy teaching classes and doing what he is doing and not get paid. You know, we are abusing this kid.” So he gave me a small budget, and they started paying me a few bucks. It wasn’t a lot, but it was enough. It was enough to keep me off the starvation list and help pay for my education. So that’s how I made it through college.

KD: Some quick questions. What [does] “CC” stand for?

LC: Connor and Castellanos.

KD: That’s what I thought.

LC: Yeah, Connor and Castellanos.

KD: And the name of the foundry that you were using?

LC: To tell you the truth, I don’t remember. It was over there on Telegraph Road.

KD: Telegraph, okay, that’s enough.

LC: It was just this old building that you probably wouldn’t walk into. It was partly outside, partly inside. It was very crude, but it was [an] effective structure.

KD: No, that’s what my grandpa did for a living.

LC: It was a real, you know, earth-made foundry. It was not a fancy building. I never saw a door on it, it never closed. You just walked into this big structure with—lighting the fire and all of the sand molds put on the one side, and then put on the other. And then they filtered the sand to give you the texture you need for your casting, you know. And the moisture content had to be perfect to preserve the detail of the casting.

KD: And you learned all that through your apprenticeship, it sounds like?

LC: Right. Yeah, I had already been working with the foundry, and the C&C Press Recovery Company wasn’t immediate. You know, when I got in school, it was about a year and a half or so after I was already on my master’s, but I was reaching my end. And that saved my life. Education-wise.

KD: So you get your degree, and then what do you go on to do?

LC: Well, then I was burned out. I had gone to college seven and a half to eight years straight. Never had a break, including summers.

- KD:** Really?
- LC:** Yeah. And then what I did was, I just wanted to not think about school or anything. One day I was passing—by then I was living in Torrance—I was passing the McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Company and it had a sign outside. “Now Hiring.” And I was still working at UPS, here on Olympic [Boulevard]. They had a building that had opened up a few years before, when I first started working part time at United Parcel Service. I was a sorter. Well, I was burned out. I wanted to leave UPS because that was a part-time job and I had to think of a way to make money to live. And so I was passing the building. I pulled into the parking lot and I walked in there and I told them that I was interested in applying for a job. And they immediately gave me an application and I filled it out. And the minute that I finished filling it out, they took it to somebody in the back room. And the lady came over, and she said, “You’re hired.” She said, “Can you start tomorrow?” I said, “Whoa, wait a minute. Give me a week.”
- KD:** You have, like, a lucky star.
- LC:** Yeah. So all I wanted to do was earn a weekly paycheck, hang out at the beach, and forget about education. I was never going to forget about my art because that is what I was doing, because now I am an art student, or an artist, whatever the hell you call it when you graduate. So I go the next day to start work. So they call me into the office and they say, “I am sorry Mr. Castellanos, we didn’t mean to misinform you, but we can’t hire [you] with this application because you are degreed.” He says, “You have a degree and we didn’t notice that at first. And we can’t hire you for the line, because you are a degreed person. You belong in personnel. You belong with management,” and so on. He said, “Unfortunately we don’t have a position open in management right now.” Plus I had my hair long and I had also a beard, like I have now, meaning, you know, light. So I said, “So what does that mean?” And they said, “Well, you know we have a new warehouse we just built to begin production on our first DC-10.” Remember the DC-10?
- KD:** Yeah.
- LC:** Well, they were just starting production of the DC-10, the first one. So they said, “Well, we have this whole warehouse that needs to be spot and run by somebody probably with your kind of background, because we notice that you have foundry work and casting metal, metal casting.” And I thought, “Oh, it’s coming back into use.” And he says, “What we are doing and what we are offering you is, if you wish, you can run the alloyed department for this component of the DC-10.” And I was like, “Whoa, what do I know about alloys?” I mean, other than, you know, that was small compared to building a DC-10. Well, I didn’t know what to do with it, so I said, “Sure, why not?” So, they took me to this giant warehouse that was empty. You know, a hanger, a big hanger.
- KD:** Right.
- LC:** It was vast. It was twice as long as a football field.
- KD:** Right.
- LC:** It has an automatic hoist that you worked with a button and also [that] a man sat on to get all the materials, because now they had they had cantilever racks, but they were empty. And then they showed me the parts, and everything is out there piled up, just as if somebody had thrown them there
- KD:** Oh, goodness.
- LC:** Somebody had to get all that material, classify [it], and put it in the cantilever rack so that it could start taking the material, start setting up machine shops to be machined for the parts of the airplane. Well, I didn’t know what “no” was because I said, “Sure, I’ll do it.” And they looked and said, “Well, okay, he says he will do it.” And they said, “Have you had experience working with . . . ,” and I said, “Well . . .” I told him [about] my experience working in the foundries and the schools, developing processes. And they said, “He may have the right mind for this. We need somebody creative, but we don’t have a system. You have to develop the system and classification for all these materials.”
- KD:** Wow.
- LC:** See, the materials were recycled from all these other projects. Some of the materials were new, and they all have extrusion. For instance, it’s a long, twenty-foot piece of aluminum. It has a number, like this, on

one end of it. But on the other end of it there was another number. When they reclassified that material for another project, they'd stamp a new number on it.

KD: Right.

LC: But nobody knew which number was the most recent.

KD: Which number was—

LC: And where—

KD: That's our defense industry.

LC: Yeah, exactly, that's why the DC-10 didn't fly too long. Anyway, so I went on and worked there. And I told myself that I was going to work there for one year. I said I am going to give myself one year to forget about school—I don't want to think about it—and have fun. I want to go to the beach. I lived by the beach, Manhattan Beach there.

KD: Oh, you did?

LC: Beautiful, beautiful. Yeah, I love the beach. I was raised on the beach in Ensenada. We used to vacation in Ensenada when I was kid, so we would spend three months out of the year and school break, playing on the beach in Ensenada, and did that for many years. Which was paradise. I loved it. So I worked there for about a year. They wanted to kick me up to management. So they told me that I had to cut my hair and shave and wear a white shirt. And I told them, "Uh, I'm not management. You offered me this job, I took it, I've done a great job." I did a great job and they loved my work. And I was a very low-key guy. I didn't go out with them. I didn't kiss anybody's ass. I wasn't interested in staying working for the company. You know, I was there for one year.

KD: Right.

LC: And I told them that, when I was hired onto this job, I promised myself one year. And they said, "Wait a minute, you know, stick around." And they started inviting me . . . They had a yacht, the company yacht.

KD: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

LC: And they started asking me to go over there. Well, I never did. You know, I never really hung out with these people. You know, they always wanted me to hang out and I didn't. I had things to do on the weekends. I didn't want to hang out with these guys.

KD: So, how did you go from there to working at TELACU?

LC: Well, that's what I am getting to now. About a year later, which was approximately a year to the date, believe it or not.

KD: Really?

LC: Esteban Torres, who was the organizer and the founder of TELACU, along with the UAW [United Auto Workers], found me. I had lived with Esteban at the time I was going to Chouinard. Esteban Torres is my cousin. Arcy Torres, his wife, is my cousin. And I lived with them. We shared a house when I was a student, going to college. So, this was how I got to know Esteban very well, you know. We got along great. We used to do little art projects together in the cellar after I used to get out of work at two in the morning. He actually used to stay up to work with me, and we used to make little stuff out of clay and, you know, mess around in art.

KD: Really?

LC: When Esteban found me, he was now putting together TELACU. This was the inception of TELACU. Well, he came over—I don't know how he found me, I forget, but he found me. And that was amazing because I didn't have a phone, I didn't have an address, or anything. All of a sudden I came out of work one day and there is Esteban Torres standing by my car. I walk over there and go, "Esteban, what the fuck are you doing here," you know. He says, "I am waiting [for you]."

[break in audio]

KD: This is Karen Davalos. We're on side 2 with Leonard Castellanos, and today is the fifteenth of October, and he was telling me [about] when his cousin, Esteban Torres, met him at work. Go ahead.

LC: There was a little funky company bar there. Not really a company bar, but across the street from the railroad tracks there was a little worker bar. We went over and had a beer, and Esteban says, “I’ve been looking for you.” He says, “I knew you graduated, and I remember when you graduated, but I couldn’t find you,” he says. Don’t ask me. I don’t remember who—and how he found me, which is amazing. “You know,” I said, “You should be the CIA. I mean, you’re bad.” So, he tells me that he had been to a meeting with some Lincoln Park people, and that the city wanted to destroy the boathouse, and the lake, and all that, which was not in use at that time. It was polluted, it was trashed. The park no longer had any lawn on it. I mean, it looked pretty bad. And of course, anybody would say, “Well, you know, it looks like shit, so, of course, put a parking lot there.” I think they were planning on destroying the park and making an industrial park of some sort. So, Esteban says, “The community’s up in arms. They don’t want the park destroyed, it’s part of the history. They’re coming up with ideas what to do. How about coming to a meeting?” he said. And just hearing him, he says, “Don’t worry about it. I want you to come up with an idea, or something, to help me out.”

So, next day or so I trucked down to Lincoln Park, find the building, there’s Frank López and community people. I remember all their names at that time. Margo Albert was not a part of it until way later. They say she’s the founder, but that’s not right. She was brought in as a sponsor to raise funds, okay?

KD: Right. The name.

LC: But that’s not a problem with that. That’s right. She had the name, she had the connection, but we’ll get to that as we go. Anyway, so I go to the meeting, and there’s Esteban. “Oh, hey, thanks for coming.” We had a PR man there. Perlstein was his name. Ed Perlstein was the PR man for TELACU. Well, he was there. We’re there just seeking ideas, plus they were there with ideas of [whether] TELACU could help. See, they’re saying, “We wanna initiate an idea to save the park and we need your help with TELACU.” You know, The East Los Angeles Community [Union].

KD: I’m a little confused. He’s your cousin, and that’s why he brings you in? Or you lived here and had a relationship to the community? Or—

LC: No, he’d been—at that time, was putting together TELACU.

KD: Right. Why you?

LC: He thought of me. Don’t ask me why.

KD: You didn’t have a relationship to Lincoln Park? No? Okay.

LC: I was brand new, other than living in East LA.

KD: Right.

LC: You know. Other than that, I had no—at that time, I had no contact with anybody. He just brought me in out of the blue, and said . . . I guess he thought I could come up with an idea. I don’t know.

KD: He knew your creative side.

LC: Yeah.

KD: Okay.

LC: So, anyway. So, we go there. After the meeting, everybody’s offering an idea. They wanted a school. They wanted to make it a market place. They wanted to clean up the lake and put water back in there. And make it into a functional boathouse, which it [had been], and make money on it, so that the city wouldn’t destroy it. And plant grass—make the park a park again. It was a big project, you know. They didn’t know what to do. So, all these ideas were being tossed around, and so we wrote them down. And we were there to listen, not so much to offer alternatives at this time, because it was brand new. We wanted to hear what the community wanted.

So, that day we were going back to TELACU, and it was about ten-thirty p.m. And Esteban and I walked into the TELACU office there. It was a building probably a little bigger than this gallery. Ed Perlstein was there with us, and we started throwing ideas together. And Esteban and I kinda concurred, just by being there, that, “Why don’t we make it an art center?” And so we started throwing that idea around. “How about an art center?” I said. “I’m an artist. What the hell? That’s my first choice.” I think I was jesting, but

Esteban, strangely enough, had been thinking along the same lines. He said, “Well, maybe an art center.” You know, there was no validity to it. It was just an idea. So, then we started throwing that around, and by the end of an hour or so, with Ed Perlstein there, we came up with the name—Plaza de la Raza—and that we would initiate an art center concept to them. And we would introduce it at the next meeting.

So, we did. So we went to the next meeting and Esteban got up there, and he said, “This is my associate, Leonard Castellanos, and we have Ed Perlstein here. So, we came up with an interesting concept.” He’s telling the community. He says, “How about an art center?” Okay, well, how about it? Well, eventually they went for the idea. It wasn’t—they didn’t hesitate much. They went for it right away. That was it. It stopped them like bubble gum. And we even had the name. We said, “How about we call it Plaza de la Raza?” “Oh, we love it. You’re kidding, you’re kidding.”

You know, so then that kicked off TELACU petitioning the city, and all that, to rent us the park for one dollar for a hundred years. That was the deal. So, we pulled out [a] one-dollar bill, and put it on the table, and just said, “That’s to put together the concept.” And the city went for it because we also, of course, offered a package that we would find funding, we’d get grants, we would build an arts center. And that was very bold because we didn’t have any money. We just walked in off the street and we’re already proposing to build an arts center, and clean up the park, and put water back in there, and save it, and plant grass. And before you knew it, we’re talking multimillion-dollar bucks here. So, that’s how Plaza de la Raza got started.

**KD:** So, you work for TELACU as the director of fine arts and cultural affairs.

**LC:** Yeah, fine arts and cultural affairs. Correct. I worked, and then . . . When this kicked off, Esteban said, “Well, we’re gonna have to bring you aboard now.” He says, “So, you just made yourself a job.” He said . . . So, he gave me a salary and that made this. And we went and got it from the storage area, and there I was, an important guy now. I had a chair, and I had a desk. It didn’t have any paper or anything, but I felt good.

**KD:** Management.

**LC:** Here I am. So, that’s how I got started as a director of fine arts and cultural affairs for TELACU, and putting together the plaza concept of Plaza de la Raza. That’s how the whole thing started.

**KD:** And what were you doing in that interim period? I guess you were there, like, a year? A year and three months?

**LC:** With TELACU?

**KD:** Yeah.

**LC:** Yeah. Well, that’s the other story. Sitting there wondering, “What am I gonna do here? What? How do I develop a cultural affairs department? I don’t know. I’ve never done that before.” So, I started putting together [ideas]. Okay, I said, “I’ll do it like I’ve always done it. I’ll write ideas down without any preconception.” So, I got me a notebook pad and started putting down ideas out of clear blue sky. You know. “Okay, fine art and cultural affairs. Okay. Exhibitions. Art. Artists.” So forth and so on. That was the beginning of organizing in the arts, in the Chicano *movimiento*, and this is how it started. It was no great big meeting. There was no voice of God. It was a little pad of paper with ideas I put down.

And, slowly, I went through each idea. I went, “Number one: Artist. Okay. How do you find artists?” So, I went to an unemployment agency. No such thing. Artists never register themselves as artists. They’re mechanics, they’re—you know, they’re everything. But, you can’t find artists in [the] unemployment department, listed as artists. Maybe one in a thousand. And that would be probably commercial. So, that’s when I got started trying to contact . . . So, then it came down that, [and] I went to several unemployment agencies, and then I went to galleries. Well, galleries didn’t have Chicano artists, they didn’t have Latin artists. Every gallery I went to. And then I didn’t know anything about galleries, right? So, when I asked to see their mailing list and stuff they [said], “What do you mean, see my mailing . . . ?” I didn’t know. I didn’t know I was walking on their toes.

**KD:** Right, right. That’s their—

LC: You know. You know how they are: “That’s my mailing list.” Well, I didn’t know. So, there I was. They didn’t wanna share information with me. “How do I do this?” You know? Plus, they aren’t Latin artists, they aren’t Chicanos.

KD: So, you were doing the galleries on La Cienega, that whole area?

LC: I was doing it everywhere it said “gallery,” or “artist.” Whatever. I didn’t know. In East LA, for instance. So, then I started [looking, and] Goez [Art Studios and Gallery] was in operation.

KD: That’s right.

LC: So, that’s how I got in touch with Goez. I went to Goez. Goez, at that time, was more of a storefront gallery exhibiting artist[s] than a community art center at that time. Later on they transformed it to other things, which is very good, I’m glad. When I first walked in there they had art on the walls and they were a gallery. The guy was standing there with a suit on and welcomed me in, [saying], “Hey, hey, how ya doing? I’m Joe [José Luis Gonzalez], and this is Goez, and this was a meat packing company.” And I knew that company because that’s the street I lived in, and I used to go to Belvedere Elementary, and I remember that little place as a meat company. They did an excellent job on it. So, Goez had four, five, or six artists. Wow, I mean, I hit the jackpot. You know what I mean? I felt like I’d found something.

KD: Found something.

LC: “So,” [I asked], “You guys have artists?” “Well, yeah. [Charles “Cat”] Felix. And this is so and so, and this is [David] Botello,” or whatever. Wow. I mean, those are—with only a few, it was a hell of a lot more than I found in a few months. So I said, “Wow.” I started asking, “How did you find these artists? Where did they come from? Where do they live?” You know? “One lives around the corner, and another one over here.” And I said, “How did you get them?” He said, “Believe it or not, when we were fixing up the place they actually walked in. And many of them just said, ‘Hey, what are you doing here?’ I’m putting together a gallery. ‘Hey, I have art work. Can I bring it and show it to you?’ Yeah. They go home and brought in their piece, and I said, ‘Great, let’s put it on the wall.’” And that was the beginning of my adventure in locating, and finding, and working with artists.

KD: What else was on your list, though? You said that was number one.

LC: What’s that?

KD: What else was on your list at TELACU?

LC: Well, the other one was put together a gallery. And then another one was put together a workshop. Well, TELACU had a building like this, but in the back. A space also about this size. Was an old warehouse that just had junk in there. You know, old desk, chairs. But it had a big door. A car door—you know, a truck door, a sliding door.

KD: Right, right.

LC: So, I cleaned it up, took out all the junk, and I started building. By myself. I started putting together a silk-screen workshop. Built the tables, built a screen, went and bought the silk, bought a staple gun. And I started putting together a workshop. I wanted to make screens so I could build—so I could start printing something. I didn’t know what yet, I just wanted a—I thought that was important. So, I needed another building for a gallery, so I went to Esteban and I said, “Hey, you know, you want me to run this department, I have to have resources. I need a building to put a gallery in.” “Great, Leonard, but where are you gonna get a building?”

Well, at that time, right near Garfield there was a library there that had been abandoned for a few years. It was still in good shape, just closed. So, I went to check it out. I told him, “I have a building in mind.” So I went over there and checked it out. It was empty. It was an old library. Very nice little building. So, I went back to Esteban and I said, “I found a little building. I want you to rent it for me.” He said, “I have no money, but let me see what I can work up.” So, we made a deal on leasing the building for a couple years or so for a couple of hundred bucks, or something, because it was abandoned, and then I would fix it. It had minor little imperfections, but nothing major.

So, I cleaned it up, I cleaned up my workshop, I cleaned up the gallery. And then I started—I said, “Okay, how am I gonna subsidize the gallery? I don’t have any money.” So, I said, “Okay, I’ll have classes.” So, I went back to TELACU and they had [a] little copy machine there that broke down every ten minutes, and I printed a hundred flyers: “Art classes starting, so and so date. Please call.” Well, I had like twenty or thirty students when I went to open the door.

KD: Really?

LC: Yeah. I go to the building, there’s twenty or thirty people waiting for me to start classes. So, that’s how that part got started.

KD: And you were charging, what, like two dollars a class, or—do you remember?

LC: I think it was thirty dollars a month.

KD: Yeah, okay.

LC: Something like that. And they actually paid. So I took the money back to TELACU and I said, “Look, Esteban, I made money.” Esteban goes, “Wow, Leonard, that’s good. That’s great.” Then he tells me, “What are you doing in the back over there? The guy’s telling me that you’re trying to get some stuff in there that you built. A table. What are you doing?” I said, “I’m putting together a silk-screen workshop.” So he said, “Is it important? Do we need it, or . . . These guys wanna put shit in there.” I said, “No, it’s a workshop. To hell with those guys. Tell them to put it in the yard.” So he went out there and told the guys, “No, man, Leonard’s building a workshop.” “Oh.” They all started laughing as if it was a big joke. “Leonard’s building a workshop.” The joke at TELACU was when we had staff—weekly staff meetings, everybody would say, “What does Leonard do here?” You know. Because nobody had ever organized in the arts, and to them it was a joke. Nobody took the arts seriously. Esteban—it wasn’t a joke to Esteban, but all of the rest of the directors, and the people there, it was a joke to them. “What does Leonard do here?” “He puts together a workshop.”

KD: But, just in general, right? That whole atmosphere of—we have it today—that artists don’t do anything productive, they are not workers.

LC: Exactly. That was very pervasive. And it still is to this day, but maybe more so then. So, I had a long uphill climb to get help from them, because every time I needed something . . . We had grant writers, and people who were on staff, but whenever I go to them with an idea they’d laugh, “Okay, Leonard, give me a paper there.” So, and then I said, “Okay, they’re not gonna help me.” I said, “Jerks.” So, I started to learn how to write grants. I went to my desk and got all of the material I could get from Esteban, from the grant writers there. I went to them and I said, “Hey, can I read that brochure there, on federal grants, and stuff?” “Sure, man, if you bring it back.” “Okay.” So I started studying how to write grants, and then I started practicing. I made up fictitious projects that were not fictitious, but they were fictitious then because no such thing existed. Like my workshop. It’s fictitious, but I wrote a grant on it. And I put a fictitious amount there. I had no idea. What do you ask for?

KD: How much?

LC: So, I put—my first grant, I think I put thirty thousand on it. The guy at economic development laughed, “Thirty thousand bucks, we don’t even get that to fix houses.” They give me this whole thing. So then it isolated me even more, but it made me more effective in learning to write grants. And eventually I got really good, and my grants started coming in. Esteban comes in and he goes, “Hey, Leonard, I just got this letter”—because I was using TELACU letterhead—“that you received a grant. Wow. It’s thirty thousand dollars.” He was so happy.

KD: Oh, you did get the thirty thousand?

LC: Yeah, we got about—we got some money. Now, I don’t remember, exactly. I think I threw in some other things that were TELACU projects, so it wasn’t really called “art.” You had to be careful. There were no such things as a total art grant at that time that I could find, see. That was only handled on the state level with the California Art Council. The National Council of the Arts—

KD: Comes later.



- LC: Yeah. Now, writing art grants, that wasn't my goal. Remember, my goal was to write a grant to get money. I didn't care—I don't care if it was building a chair, a desk, painting the dog pink, it didn't matter. I had no idea. I was grabbing at thin air trying to make—like I said, it was a fictitious concept. I didn't know. So, it wasn't called art. It was called a development grant. See? And so, in getting a little bit of develop grant money, for instance, helped me get—I, by then, got about three buildings. I had three buildings that I managed all over East LA. I ran the library classes, and I was able to buy some paints and stuff for my silk screen, and real Chinese silk to stretch on the screen, and materials. I actually had pencils, and rulers, and, you know, little things. They were little things, but they were very important things.
- KD: They weren't snickering at you at the meetings anymore.
- LC: Well, by then they were looking in, and they wouldn't come in, see? And then I moved my—I had an office, a little office, in the main building of TELACU, but then I moved everything out of there and put it in the workshop. I didn't want nothing to do with these idiots. The secretaries were great. They would do my typing, they would do what I asked them to do. But the staff, they were reluctant because they didn't wanna be seen as fools trying to help me with my art. "Did you ask him about that?" "Yeah, yeah. Put it in the trashcan." [*laughter*] I don't think that they meant to be that way. That was just the prevailing concept. Nobody knew. I didn't know, myself. They had no idea, so how were they gonna have an idea when I didn't have one either? So, I took it in stride. They weren't being mean to me or anything like that, but it was a new area of thought, concept, and development.
- KD: And I'm going to run out of time here, but I wanted to—I don't know how to do this because we have so much to do.
- LC: Well, as I said, there's a lot, and we're just scratching the surface.
- KD: No, this is just scratching the surface because, I mean, I have all these notes about the way you were involved with [how] fundraising continues for Plaza de la Raza through Mechicano Art Center, but we haven't even gotten to how you went from TELACU to Mechicano.
- LC: Yeah. That's another book. I gotta stand up for a minute here.
- KD: Yeah, let me pause. You can stand because I think my mic is good enough. We took a pause because we're going to have to close up. I have another engagement today.
- LC: Yeah, I'm sorry we're late, but [*inaudible*].
- KD: That's okay. So, Leonard, I—I'm stunned with all this management. Advocate for the arts. Inventing a way to create a cultural center. I wonder if you could just reflect for the last few minutes about how you felt at the time. You've said several times that you were inventing it, it was fictitious, that you didn't know. But did you have a sense at the time that this was important work, [that] you were at the beginning [of] something?
- LC: Yes, I did. I thought it was important, otherwise I wouldn't have worked on it. I had—for some reason I felt an inner urgency to do this. Plus the fact that when I started working with TELACU I had no job description. I had to make it up. So, I had a great freedom. They gave me great freedom. I wasn't afraid, but I was so anxious to get moving on something that, like I said, I had to actually invent—I invented everything before I developed it. I invented it in my mind, and in writing, but I knew nowhere to go with it. In other words, I wrote grants, but I had nowhere to put them until I learned the process. So, what I did inspired me to—because it gave me something in my head. It gave me substance. With the grants that I started writing, again, they weren't called art grants. They were just called grants. They were grants to housing, to anything that contributed to me. It could be a table, it could be a chair, it could be pencils. I didn't think in terms of grants in developing arts. That wasn't born yet.
- KD: When you saw twenty to thirty people show up for that first art class you offered, did it say to you, "Wow, there is a need in this community?"
- LC: Of course. See, that was solid. Every little victory gave me a great joy. It was like a discovery. It was like discovering those tin boxes. It was like an invention. I was inventing this, and it was actually becoming real. And I never knew that you could have that kind of power. I was actually inventing something. I was

inventing people, I was inventing grants, I was inventing—I invented everything. And then I found a place to put it. But, that required research, study, learning grants, getting to the NEA, getting to the California Arts Council, going to the city, making political connections. Eventually, all of that development, it developed from the ground up. Nobody gave me a plan. Nobody knew, or had a plan.

Like I said, at TELACU, they weren't unusual. Everybody was that way. They weren't being mean. They didn't know any more than I did. So, they weren't being—they weren't going out of their way to be mean, or reflect or not reflect on my ideas. Nobody had an idea of what to do with them. I didn't—I myself didn't. So, I had to develop a way to deliver what I promised myself I was doing. Developing a workshop, for instance. Okay, what am I gonna do with it? What am I gonna print? What kind of ideas? And then if I print a hundred posters, where am I gonna take them? Am I gonna sell them? Am I gonna give them away? What am I gonna print them on? Where do I get paper? Those little simple things were big victories at the time.

Somebody gave me—I went to Zellerbach and they donated a couple of boxes of paper, two thousand sheets of paper, which I was only asking for a couple hundred. I went in there very humble, and said, "I have a little workshop. Do you have paper, maybe, you're not using, that's outdated, or anything?" And he goes, "Do you have a building?" Yeah. I gave him my address and everything. Two days later a truck pulls up, drops off these huge boxes, and it said "Zellerbach" on it. I dragged them into my workshop, opened [them] up. Beautiful, glossy printing paper. Just—and they gave it, they donated it to TELACU because I told them it was TELACU and I'm trying to start an art workshop, but I didn't have any money. I thought the guy shined me on. He was actually pretty rude, but he was—turned out to be Santa Claus. He didn't tell me he was gonna do it, didn't say he had anything to give me. He just said, "Give me your address and I'll see what I can do." So I said, "Okay, well, I tried." Well, [*inaudible*]. [*laughter*] But, that's literally true. But, everything was—everything . . . See, there was no downside because it had never been done before. So I didn't have a downside. But now you have a downside. In other words, you have a gallery, you have art. If tomorrow this was to close, you'd have [a] downside. I didn't have a downside. It was all new. Though I didn't know it at the time. But that's the way it works.

**KD:** Oh, thank you. I hope this is the beginning of many, many more. Thank you so much.

**LC:** Well, thank you.





## INTERVIEW WITH LEONARD CASTELLANOS

---

### RELATED RESOURCES

#### Publications from the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press

“Free Association.” By Chon A. Noriega and Pilar Tompkins Rivas. *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 36, no. 2 (2011): 1–18.

*L.A. Xicano*. Edited by Chon A. Noriega, Terezita Romo, and Pilar Tompkins Rivas. Exhibition catalog, 2011.  
*The Oscar Castillo Papers and Photograph Collection*, edited by Colin Gunckel, with an essay by Leonard Castellanos. The Chicano Archives, volume 5, 2011.

#### Special Collections at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Library, Los Angeles, California

CARA: Chicano Arts: Resistance and Affirmation Papers, [volume I], 1985–1994

CARA: Chicano Arts: Resistance and Affirmation Papers, volume II, ca. 1986–1992

---

### UCLA CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER

The UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) was founded in 1969 with a commitment to foster multidisciplinary research efforts as part of the land grant mission of the University of California. That mission states that University of California research must be in the service of the state and maintain a presence in the local community.

The CSRC strives to balance interdisciplinary and applied research in ways that can impact traditional academic departments and disciplines. Through all of these efforts, the CSRC exemplifies UCLA’s institutional priorities—academic excellence, civic engagement, and diversity—and remains committed to research that makes a difference.

[WWW.CHICANO.UCLA.EDU](http://WWW.CHICANO.UCLA.EDU)