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## José Angel Gutierrez: An Oral History Conversation

*Manuel Medrano*

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*The 1960's was a tumultuous decade in United States history, particularly for Mexican Americans in Texas seeking educational and political equality. In this edited transcript of an interview with prominent Chicano leader and Raza Unida founder José Angel Gutierrez, Manuel Medrano examines the various forces that shaped the life and career of the civil rights activist.*

*El valiente vive hasta que el cobarde quiere* is a Spanish proverb translated to the valiant lives while the coward allows him to. The 1960's was a decade of pivotal change in United States history where the courageous and the cowardly crossed paths in the arenas of space exploration, medical research and political realignment. The traditional status quo seemed to be in question in a decade of social engagement manifested through the war protest, feminist and environmental protection movements. Nowhere, however, was engagement more critical than in the civil rights movement. For Mexican Americans this movement provided voices to challenge political, economic, social and educational omissions and abuses. In California, Cesar Chavez organized farm workers; in Colorado, Corky Gonzalez organized urban community reformers; in New Mexico, Reies Lopez Tijerina led the crusade to regain lands lost as a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In Texas, a young, articulate and charismatic Chicano leader named José Angel Gutierrez campaigned for educational and political equality. Today, as a college professor, attorney and author he continues to champion

those same causes.

José Angel Gutierrez was born in Crystal City, Texas on October 25, 1944 “in the Chicano side of town.”<sup>21</sup> His father, Angel, was born in Matamoros, Tamaulipas in 1883 and by the age of sixteen was attending medical school in Torreon, Coahuila. During the Mexican Revolution Pancho Villa forced him and all the other medical students to be in his ambulatory medical corp. He eventually became mayor of Torreon, but he was later forced to leave Mexico and move to the Rio Grande Valley. Eventually, he became a doctor in Crystal City. Gutierrez’s mother, Concepcion Fuentes, was born in Detroit, Michigan. Although Gutierrez’s father was considerably older, they married in 1934 when she was only sixteen.

As a child, Gutierrez attended segregated schools. He attended kindergarten at a private school called “*la escuelita de Susie*.”<sup>22</sup> Learning bilingually, he acquired the cognitive skills in Spanish and the vowels and consonants in both languages. Gutierrez recalled using apple crates as desks and being hit with a ruler on his hands if he made a mistake reciting the multiplication tables. At home, his father emphasized Spanish and in the evenings, he would sit outside with him and teach him about astronomy, Greek mythology, and the Mexican Revolution. His mother emphasized English and spoke to him about the importance of career choices. Both wanted him to become a doctor, but Gutierrez did not want to work the grueling hours that his father worked. To appease his parents, he proclaimed that he wanted to be an attorney one day. “I was going to be a lawyer, but I never knew what a lawyer was. I never met one. I started saying that just to get them off.”<sup>23</sup> Ironically, Gutierrez eventually became an attorney.

His father died in 1957 when Gutierrez was twelve years old. Gutierrez remembers that he “turned our world upside down because then we were poor like everybody else.”<sup>24</sup> He and his mother became migrant workers. Despite the personal hardships, Gutierrez was an exceptional student in high school becoming junior class president at a time when Mexican Americans outnumbered Anglos for the first time at Crystal City High School. That same year he played football on the segregated B team. He remembers that the B team players “were used as the dummies to tackle. Well, I figured that out really quick, and I said I’m not going to take all these *golpes* (hits), no

way.”<sup>5</sup>

One day as he walked by the auditorium, he saw some pretty Anglo girls reciting poetry and acting, along with a few Anglo boys. He went inside and was informed by the speech coach that because he had entered without permission, Gutierrez was now required to read poetry. The speech coach handed him a poem and he read it in front of the group. His coach informed Gutierrez that he was “the first Mexican kid that didn’t speak with an accent and could enunciate.”<sup>6</sup> José Angel Gutierrez soon became a member of the debate team and participated in the one act play for the interscholastic league competition. Gutierrez remembers, “all these words that I had never heard before, much less the interscholastic league. I thought that it had something to do with outer space... I practiced and he taught me how to speak; I became the first Chicano state champion in Texas in public speaking. It was unheard of.”<sup>7</sup>

That same year another Chicano, Ricardo Gallegos, “Riche,” won the state championship in the mile run for Crystal City High School and Ricardo Romo, now the President of the University of Texas at San Antonio, won the mile run for the largest schools division. Gutierrez reminisced,

So in 1961 we were the champions, and everyone was making a big to do about this. I was junior class president and one of my responsibilities was to organize the prom for the seniors. We raised money and had an election for prom servers. My principal, an ex-marine and a mountain of a man at six foot three inches and 240 pounds was my hero at the time. I wanted to be like him until that day when I took in the returns for the election of prom servers and they were all Chicanos and Chicanas. He threw them all away and said that there would be ‘no race mixing here’. He then drew a line on a sheet of paper and wrote several names on it and handed it to me. He said that these *Meskins* would be the ones along with these Anglos and “we’re not going to have them paired up.”<sup>8</sup>

When Gutierrez refused and challenged the principal’s actions, he was threatened with expulsion if he did not follow orders. Gutierrez remembers,

Well, I went back and got the class together and explained to them and that I was not going to do anything about it, but that's what he said. And I had this *coraje* (rage) built up inside me. How could this man do this?<sup>9</sup>

Gutierrez realized that contrary to what he read in history and government books about majority rule and democracy; the actual world was different. Here was the contradiction between ideals and reality, and that's when it started sinking in.

Later that year the students elected school favorites including most beautiful, most handsome and most popular. The rules changed there, too. Some students contacted movie stars Kim Novac and Troy Donahue and requested that they judge the photographs of students vying for most handsome and most beautiful. Time passed and the students believed that they had not been contacted by the Hollywood actors. Gutierrez recalls,

One day we were up to no good so we broke into the school and went into the journalism teacher's desk and ... went through the desk and found this packet with the pictures and letters from Kim Novac and Troy Donahue. I think it was saying that they didn't feel they could judge our standard of beauty and that all the kids that were submitted were beautiful, and they just didn't want to do this. Well, we couldn't tell anybody that we'd been rejected and ... the program was scheduled ... a week later. Well, I'll be damned if we didn't have the program, and they had forged the signatures of these people... They had these letters saying they picked these Anglos to be the most handsome and most beautiful. I knew the system was corrupt, but I also knew that I couldn't do anything about it ... I made a personal vow then to channel my hate and my disgust to rage... That's when I believe my activism began because I tried to find ways to do things to change that.<sup>10</sup>

By his senior year in 1962, political activism in Crystal City had begun with the creation of PASSO, the Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organizations. Shortly before, Henry B. Gonzalez had campaigned in the city for a seat in the U.S. Congress. To many Mexican Americans he was a *líder* (leader) for Mexican Americans. To Gutierrez *líder* was a word that he

had never heard in Spanish, and he believed that it was just a made up Chicano word for leader. He was told that Chicanos did not have any of these, so he and other children went to see one. As the well-dressed Gonzalez stood on a platform and gave his speech in English, Gutierrez remembered “*pues este Henry B. se avienta man, este vato está desgraciado*. These are the things that we, the *palomia*, the *chavalada* processed” (loosely translated this means that Henry B. Gonzalez impressed the youngsters and they remembered him).<sup>11</sup>

As this movement for change developed, Gutierrez gravitated toward it. Because he was the state champion public speaker, Gutierrez spoke for los cinco, the five Mexican American candidates running for commissioners in Crystal City. He agreed and spoke about the issues that Anglos had ignored. Gutierrez emphasized that the Anglos had the opportunities to address the problems of the community but chose not to. For that reason Mexican Americans who chose to care should be elected to resolve those issues. Gutierrez remembers,

well, this went over real big; they thought I was real brave. I thought I was just saying, *como dicen, los niños y los borrachos dicen la verdad* (as they say children and drunkards say the truth); you know, so I was just telling the truth that I saw. Well, the bravery part was not only saying it in English so that the gringos could hear. I mean the *raza* was terrified when you would say anything that would offend the Anglo, *el Americano, el mister...* We also had the Texas Rangers patrolling our political rallies...I learned that as long as there was a crowd and as long as you could defend your position, you could say things about them. And so I did; I would point and I'd say *hay van los pinches rinches* (there go the terrible Rangers). You know, *piensan que nos van a intimidir* (they believe that they can intimidate us). We're not afraid, we're right here. *Pues* this was just tremendous for the crowd because I learned that crowds vicariously identify with the speaker and when you envision things...and articulate things for them, they take it as their own words... So that's how I learned the public speaking in a mature way.<sup>12</sup>

Subsequently, he was threatened by the Texas Rangers. Gutierrez remembers that they tried to intimidate him by kid-

napping and threatening to assassinate him. He learned the lesson that politics was both good and bad. In the process, he became both determined and enraged, but unafraid. He understood that history many times was violent, and that nothing changed peacefully. Gutierrez also realized that poverty was violent and so was arresting and intimidating innocent people. To him the political arena was just another challenge with bigger people. Ironically, Gutierrez was not even old enough to vote, but he did participate meaningfully by presenting speeches, registering voters, raising money and at times "selling the poll tax illegally."<sup>13</sup>

*Los cinco candidatos* (the five candidates) won and he received a patronage job as the head of Parks and Recreation at the age of seventeen. Gutierrez was in charge of what had historically been a segregated pool and promptly arranged for its desegregation. He was also given the responsibility of keeping adults, including Anglos, from drinking near the pool. Tensions increased because for the first time Crystal City had Chicano policemen but they were hesitant to arrest Anglos, not knowing what might happen. Gutierrez remembers, "it was a very scary, a very dangerous time, but I managed."<sup>14</sup> Eventually, Anglo opposition and intimidation and divisive infighting among the Chicano voters resulted in the loss for *los cinco* in the next election.

Gutierrez then moved to Los Angeles, California and became involved with MAPA, the Mexican American Political Association. Before working as a copy boy taking ads for a newspaper, he literally lived at a train station for a few days. During that time he was befriended by a prostitute who worked there and helped him get a place to live. Soon he found work as a copy boy taking ads for a newspaper by riding through downtown Los Angeles on a bicycle. Later, a gas company employee that he had met while working for the newspaper asked him if he could run a print shop. Gutierrez replied that he could. He recalled, "I said yeah, that arrogance, you know, that I could do anything. I went to the library, got a book and looked at multi-lists... the designs and the diagrams."<sup>15</sup> With reading and some training he learned how to do the work in about three days. The camera crewman, an older man, taught him about the camera work required in the layouts. The man died suddenly in 1963 and Gutierrez was asked to head that

department at the age of eighteen. He did for a short time and made an excellent salary but then decided to enroll at Los Angeles City College. He never attended, however, and returned to south Texas. For the next few months, he migrated north and worked as a municipal pool lifeguard in Waterford, Wisconsin to survive financially.

Gutierrez began his college studies at Texas A&I University in Kingsville during the fall semester in 1964. There he attempted to organize a chapter of Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organizations, but did not receive proper documentation from the national organization and he could not recruit a faculty sponsor. In addition, University personnel claimed that the institution did not allow political organizations on campus, yet the Young Democrats and Young Republicans were already there. Undeterred, Gutierrez organized the Texas A&I PASSO chapter, and its members traveled to the PASSO state convention in San Antonio. After arriving, they were told at the registration desk that they were not members and could not vote. Still determined to participate at the convention, they walked onto the convention floor and demanded the right to join. Gutierrez then stood up and gave an impassioned speech for inclusion. The other delegates were thoroughly impressed and voted immediately to amend their constitution to include the A&I chapter. The educational experience at A&I University provided significant lessons about discrimination for the young Gutierrez. He recalls,

...that's where I learned my mass mobilization skills of getting big demonstrations and organizing things... and I learned a lot... I learned there that Chicanos got flunked for taking orientation; they would actually flunk us because then we would have to take it again and pay more money again... I had heard of that at the community college but I hadn't experienced it until I got to A&I. and then they imposed the English essay that if you didn't write an essay that they approved of you couldn't graduate. I began to see this as a discrimination against us as a class at the institutional level of the university.<sup>16</sup>

After graduating from Texas A&I University in 1966, Gutierrez enrolled at the University of Houston Law School. There

were only three Mexican Americans in the freshman class and no women or African Americans. It was both a frustrating and disappointing experience for Gutierrez. He had believed that law school was an avenue to change the world and realized that it was a system to keep the world as it was. After leaving the University of Houston, he enrolled at St. Mary's University in San Antonio where he was intellectually stimulated and flourished as a student. That same year he married Luz Bazán from Falfurrias, Texas.

It was on St. Mary's campus that a chance meeting with Willie Velasquez, Ignacio Perez, Juan Patlán, and Mario Compean occurred. They were volunteering for the farm workers. Gutierrez realized that they were all complaining about the same thing, education. Gutierrez remembers,

We didn't believe that there was such a thing as a dropout. We thought...we were pushed out and we knew because we were spanked for speaking Spanish; we were humiliated, we were made to identify with Davy Crockett and say that Santa Anna was a dictator and the Mexicans were terrible. We were all dumb, poor, and migrant. All these negative things... The school system denudes you, strips you of your culture and your heritage and reprograms you to be Anglo... I mean in order to succeed in the American public education system you gotta be an Anglo; that's what the job is, and it doesn't fit...you know, it doesn't wear well. So we took on education...If we couldn't get an education, then no one else could either, so that's how we started saying... we're gonna do school strikes and school walkouts. If they're not gonna let us speak Spanish and if they're not gonna let us have Mexican food in the cafeteria, and we can't play Mexican music, and we can't have Chicano history and have Chicano teachers, then nobody will have any school.<sup>17</sup>

From these student leaders emerged the idea of forming an organization of organizers, which became MAYO—The Mexican American Youth Organization. Gutierrez and the MAYO organization learned about activism outside of Texas and traveled to other states to listen to civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X and Reies Lopez Tijerina. They

recorded some of the speeches, brought back some literature to their “study circle” and increased their knowledge.

Despite this on site training, many of their attempts at protest were unsuccessful. The generation gap among Chicanos at times deterred galvanization. Gutierrez remembered his initial frustration,

...I participated in 39 school walkouts and failed in 38 of them. Thirty nine was Crystal where I succeeded...It was a learning process... And that’s how we began organizing; the youth were with us right away; I mean they had the same problems we had had a generation back, so we were connected. Our grandparents, you know, like those of the age of my father, the old *revolucionarios* (revolutionaries), they were connected to us because they understood about the gringo and the problems.<sup>18</sup>

MAYO’s next task was to convince parents and the business community to support their goals of ending the Vietnam War, question the apathy in the Catholic Church and halting Texas Ranger abuse. The challenge was considerable because MAYO was confronting several powerful organizations. Using the news media and its own recording and photography equipment allowed members some protection during the public protests. At times, they were called Communists for demanding the right to speak Spanish and to have bilingual education programs. Support from parents increased because they witnessed these young educated Chicanos challenge the Texas Rangers and other institutions. Additionally, MAYO seemed to elicit a responsive chord from women and young people. The Chicano, the farm worker, the women’s and youth movement seemed to converge during this era.

In 1968, Gutierrez received a Master of Arts degree in Government from St. Mary’s University. Subsequently, he took his entrance exam for law school and scored well but decided instead to pursue a Ph.D in Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Despite being married to a wife expecting a child and being enrolled in a doctoral program, Gutierrez was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1968. Consequently, his MAYO activity was suspended, and Mario Compean became the chairman of the organization. After completing his military service,

Gutierrez resumed his political organizing. MAYO spearheaded strikes at schools throughout Texas while other students did the same across the Southwest. He returned angry at the continuing segregation of and discrimination against Chicanos. As a result, he and his wife Luz began an organization Ciudadanos Unidos whose major goal was to integrate political awareness groups divided by gender. One of its achievements was that it brought together both men and women to discuss common political goals such as the reduction of crime, school dropouts, and poverty.

In Crystal City, conditions at the high school remained much the same as they were before Gutierrez left for the Army. Discrimination continued and was evident in the selection of sweethearts and cheerleaders during the football season. Traditionally, only one Mexican American girl was allowed on the cheerleading squad and both the football sweetheart and the homecoming queen were always Anglo. According to guidelines, for a girl to be selected cheerleader, both her parents must have graduated from Crystal City High School. In 1969, student activists organized by Gutierrez demanded a change in this policy as well as other regulations prohibiting speaking Spanish on campus and learning about Mexican and Mexican American history. When the school board rejected the demands the students staged a walkout in protest. They were supported by their parents, the business community, the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund, State Senator Joe Bernal and some sympathetic Anglos like Sherill Smith, Crystal City priest at the Sacred Heart Church. Eventually, the school board rescinded the policy and adopted a more inclusive one. As a result, Diana Palacios became head cheerleader at Crystal City High School the following year.

Soon after Gutierrez and others began to organize Raza Unida candidates for the school board, city and county elections. Except in Hidalgo County their candidates were removed from the ballots in 1970. In 1972, however, Raza Unida candidates won fifteen out of sixteen races in three cities. Gutierrez recalls,

now because we had been involved in those elections from 63' forward, I knew about how they cheated I knew about the Rangers I knew how they stuffed the ballot box

I knew about election contests and recounts and all that I already knew all these things, but I never was responsible. Well, here I am now responsible and since we knew, we prepared, we had money; we raised the money; and we kicked butt.<sup>19</sup>

By 1976, Mexican American Democrats had increased in numbers and worked along with traditional opposition to undermine the Raza Unida Party. It was also unfortunate that the party's gubernatorial candidate in 1972 and in 1974, Ramsey Muñiz, was arrested for marijuana possession, violated bail, and was convicted once more. Many accused Raza Unida members of being drug users and pushers. Gutierrez refutes that by saying, "by and large it wasn't our activity in crime that they hated; it was our politics that they hated and used a criminal allegation to destroy us, our reputations and our credibility."<sup>20</sup> Despite this, the Raza Unida Party became a national organization. This resulted in the hiring of more Chicano administrators, an increase in bilingual education training, and employment opportunities in Chicano Studies Programs. It seemed to alter the nature of politics and legitimized a hunger for power. More Chicano candidates appeared to run for office, especially from the Rio Grande Valley. According to Gutierrez, the militancy for change seemed to empower young Chicanos,

You know the *Mexicanos* for a long, long time didn't accept us because we talked funny, and they said we were gringos, and the *gringos* didn't like us because they said we were "Mexicans," so we only did the logical thing; we learned to love ourselves, you know. And we made that a culture, a Chicano culture.<sup>21</sup>

In 1976, Gutierrez completed his Ph.D. in Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Years later he returned to the University of Houston Law School and received his Jurisprudence degree in 1988 because according to Gutierrez, "*soy terco* (I'm determined); no one's gonna knock me down and me not get up."<sup>22</sup> During the 1990's he practiced law in Dallas, was a special advisor to the President of the University of Texas at Arlington, and founded and directed the Center of Mexican

American Studies there. Since 1998, he has also been Associate Professor of Political Science at UT Arlington.<sup>23</sup>

In many ways José Angel Gutierrez was both a catalyst for and a recipient of *el movimiento* (the Movement). Although it is historically over, its ideology remains at the forefront of his work. He comments,

the Chicano movement in general pushed for a political empowerment and we opened the doors and got people elected to office. They thought all this was about just a personnel change to get rid of Anglos... I say no, no, no; it's to transform the world, to make it to fit us... It takes a lot to be an activist agent. You pay a high price, but it is also very rewarding and there's a lot of things that happen every day where there are golden opportunities to organize and to point out things...<sup>24</sup>

Nearly four decades after the Raza Unida Party was organized, José Angel Gutierrez is a scholar, author, attorney and public speaker who remains an activist at heart. As a result, he has evoked anger and praise from both Anglos and Mexican Americans while questioning the status quo. His dedication to political, educational, economic and racial justice has never wavered, and he will never apologize for his commitment, methods or confidence. He often tells his audiences,

let's just say that...you've got to be able to love yourself, to have good mental health... Then, you've got to be strong; you've got to be informed; you've got to be able to defend your position. No one's going to accept you as an equal unless you think you are... So it starts with you.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout his life, Gutierrez has followed his own advice, and whether people agree or disagree with his methods, the Chicano community is better for it. School segregation has decreased significantly and political and educational opportunities have increased. Overall, some empowerment has occurred. Gutierrez, however, is the first to admit that much still has to be done, so his advocacy continues and so does his legacy.

## Endotes

1. Interview of José Angel Gutierrez by Manuel F. Medrano on April 3, 2000. Interview was conducted at The University of Texas at Brownsville Media Services Department. Transcribed by Monica Lerma. Transcripts and tapes are located at The University of Texas at Brownsville. In 2009 Humanities Texas and The University of Texas of Brownsville Media Services collaborated on the digitization of the Los del Valle Oral History Series, a collection of twenty two edited profiles. A website was created to access these profiles, [www.utb.edu/losdelvalle](http://www.utb.edu/losdelvalle). The profile of José Angel Gutierrez is number twenty-one.

Dr. Gutiérrez's papers on the *La Raza* organization are at the Benson Library, University of Texas. There are other papers and documents from Dr. Gutiérrez at the University of Texas-San Antonio. See for example: "A guide to the Jose Angel Gutierrez Papers, 1959-1991." <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utsa/00002/utsa-00002.html>

Professor Gutiérrez is also the creator of a substantial collection "Tejano Voices" at the University of Texas Arlington Center for Mexican American Studies Oral History Project. See: <http://libraries.uta.edu/tejanovoices/gutierrez.asp>. He is currently working on a manuscript: **Chicano Manual on How to Handle Gringos: Chicano Leadership: Local Elected Officials in Texas, 1950-2000**, which is based on 157 oral history interviews he conducted between 1996 and 2000. [See: <http://libraries.uta.edu/tejanovoices/gutierrez.asp>]

2. Interview of José Angel Gutierrez by Manuel F. Medrano on April 3, 2000

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16. Interview of José Angel Gutierrez by Manuel F. Medrano on April 3, 2000

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19. Interview of José Angel Gutierrez by Manuel F. Medrano on April 3, 2000

20. Interview of José Angel Gutierrez by Manuel F. Medrano on April 3, 2000

21. Interview of José Angel Gutierrez by Manuel F. Medrano on April 3, 2000

22. Interview of José Angel Gutierrez by Manuel F. Medrano on April 3, 2000

23. Curriculum Vitae José Angel Gutierrez 2007

24. Interview of José Angel Gutierrez by Manuel F. Medrano on April 3, 2000

25. Interview of José Angel Gutierrez by Manuel F. Medrano on April 3, 2000

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