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Interview with Fernando Armenta

Fernando Armenta

California State University, Monterey Bay

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Interviewee: Fernando Armenta
Interviewer: Melissa Brubaker
Date of Interview: October 4, 2012
Duration of Interview: 01:32:06

Melissa Brubaker 00:10
So, my name is Melissa Brubaker, and I'm here with Fernando Armenta.

Fernando Armenta 00:14
Yes.

Melissa Brubaker 00:14
And the time is—the time is 12:56. And if I may have your permission to conduct this interview?

Fernando Armenta 00:24
Yes.

Melissa Brubaker 00:24
And with this I also have the release form for you to sign after—

Fernando Armenta 00:30
Okay.

Melissa Brubaker 00:30
—of what you will permit us—

Fernando Armenta 00:31
Okay.

Melissa Brubaker 00:32
—kind of what can be out there. And so what I'm gonna start off with is if you can tell me a little bit of your family's history of coming here in Salinas or anywhere around this area?

Fernando Armenta 00:47
Well, I was born and raised here in Salinas. So, I was born October 24, 1948. My mother, Ramona Lake Armenta, was—she passed away about six, seven years ago. So, she was born in Casa Blanca, California, and she had about twelve children. So, I'm in about the middle. My father is Aurelio Guadalupe Armenta. He was born in 1898 in Sinaloa, Mexico. Not sure exactly when he came to the United States. I think probably in the early 30s—1930s. He worked at Spreckels Sugar Company for forty years. And then he passed away in June of 1969. Most of—me and my brothers and sisters went to the local elementary schools like Roosevelt, Washington Middle School, and most of us went to Salinas High School, and most of us graduated from Salinas High School.

Melissa Brubaker 02:19
And can you tell me about how it was living on that side of Salinas?

Fernando Armenta 02:25
Well, at Roosevelt School, for me, I started about probably—Jesus Christ, probably about fifty-nine years ago, probably in the first grade. So up until the sixth grade there, I would—looks like at that time, for a number of years, at least through sixth grade, that probably eighty percent of the students were Caucasian. So, it's a complete difference now. It's the other way around now. About eighty or ninety percent are Mexican Americans at Roosevelt School. That trend kind of continued at Washington Middle School and also at Salinas High School. So I grew up actually around the neighborhood where this building is at, down by—I grew up over here by—near the John Steinbeck house, on Archer Street and Capitol Street and Park Street.

Melissa Brubaker 03:46
And can you tell me how that possibly have affected you or your family being around that kind of ethnicity?

Fernando Armenta 03:56
Well, it's—most of the Mexican American parents and families either worked in the fields—a great majority at that time worked in [unclear] or Spreckels Sugar Company. Most of us were low income, limited resources, limited food to eat. And so it made it difficult to socially and educationally be successful. And, you know, at the age of eight, I was the only one in my family that got malnourished, and I caught tuberculosis at the age of eight. So I was hospitalized for four months at Natividad Medical Center in the TB sanitarium at that time. So at that time, it was—it could have been very contagious during that time. Nowadays, it's completely different. So, it was difficult also in the sense that some of us were—at least once a week were picked on by non-Latinos for who we were, how we were dressed, not being able to eat in the cafeteria, not being able to bring your own lunch pail. So, you were exposed, and sometimes you had to carry—I'm not sure, it could be maybe construed as racial resentment, which is unfortunate.

Melissa Brubaker 06:11
Yeah, but could you say it was being segregated possibly?

Fernando Armenta 06:16
I don't think it was [unclear] of intentional segregation, because I can't recall how many Mexican Americans were actually in Alisal. I think for the most part, the big migration didn't start until the 1950s, or between 1950s and 1965 in Alisal, of Mexican Americans.

Melissa Brubaker 06:42
Right. And I'm curious to know if there was just in that area that was just mainly Caucasians, or was it the whole Salinas that was—

Fernando Armenta 06:50

The whole city of Salinas was mostly Caucasian.

Melissa Brubaker 06:57
And so could you also maybe tell me a memory that you had growing up?

Fernando Armenta 07:05
A memory—

Melissa Brubaker 07:07
It could be any memory you've had, whether it was a good or bad experience.

Fernando Armenta 07:13
Well, I just mentioned one. The very—probably the most depressing time was being four months in a TB sanitarium, because your family could not, for the first four months, could physically come and visit you. And my mother, I think, after a week or two was allowed to personally have personal contact with me. She was not allowed to have any kind of physical contact with me. And the rest of the family members had to visit through the outside of a window of a hospital. So it was a pretty traumatic, profound experience in me that I think shaped, eventually shaped who I am today.

Melissa Brubaker 08:09
Right, and I could see how hard that would be. So, how was it going back out of the hospital to going back to how you were living before, before the illness came?

Fernando Armenta 08:23
Well, nothing—for me nothing much changed. For me personally, it was an experience that had a lasting effect on me throughout my life. You know, was the community or experience going to be any different? No. You know, my neighborhood Salinas would still be the same for years to come after that.

Melissa Brubaker 08:51
Right. So, when you did notice that more Hispanics were coming into the community, what were your thoughts about that?

Fernando Armenta 09:01
Well, at that time, because of my age and experience, I didn't really understand globally what was causing migration into California, and to what extent, especially from Mexico. All I knew is during the summer, down on Market Street and down near Chinatown area near market street, there was always, on Saturday mornings, like, a lot of farm labor buses stopping and picking up farmworkers, and picking them up and dropping them off from four in the morning until late in the afternoon.

Melissa Brubaker 09:53
Right, and I remember in our pre-interview you mentioned you were a paperboy?

Fernando Armenta 09:58

I used to, around—between the ages of ten and thirteen, I was selling the Salinas Californian down on the first 100 block of Main Street down in Chinatown at that time, because in those days almost every pool hall and saloon and restaurant and bar that was in Chinatown was open.

Melissa Brubaker 10:32
Right.

Fernando Armenta 10:32
There was no vacant, unoccupied buildings down there at that time. And I used to go down there, you know, sometimes—not every week, but [unclear], go down there, carry my little box and shine shoes.

Melissa Brubaker 10:48
Right, and I've been there recently not too long ago, but I would like to know, how do you remember it as when you used to give papers around that area? Like, do you remember how it looked like, besides the open bars and what you've seen around there?

Fernando Armenta 11:06
Pretty much a lot of Filipinos, a lot of Mexican Americans for the most part, you know, after work and on weekends enjoying a social time down there playing pool. You know, they would go down to the saloon and do what people do at the saloon, is drink beer for the most part. There used to be a nightclub, like, towards the end of Soledad Street. I think it was called—I forget. I think the Lions Club, but I could be wrong. So, you know, there was a lot of activity starting in the mid-afternoon to the, you know, late hours of the evening, so it was probably a very lively entertainment area. You know, it was rhythm and blues down there and a lot of Mexican music, where you would probably find it nowhere else in any part of Salinas during that time.

Melissa Brubaker 12:19
Right. And would you say that you liked to visit Chinatown often?

Fernando Armenta 12:26
I was only allowed to go down there, because you couldn't really be down there if you were under the age of 18 during evening hours. So you were only allowed to go down there to sell newspapers and shine shoes, and you're not allowed, because of your age, to hang around Chinatown.

Melissa Brubaker 12:51
Right.

Fernando Armenta 12:51
Yeah.

Melissa Brubaker 12:53
And is there a really specific memory you have about going into Chinatown?

Fernando Armenta 13:05

It was a very lively area. There was really no homelessness down there at all during that period of time, and folks were enjoying themselves, entertaining each other, having a good time. And it was all done without any kind of violence at that time. You know, so it was a very positive way to sort of enjoy your time off, and socializing down there, and for the most part, a lot of farmworkers and packing shed workers would hang out there. Not everybody in town, though.

Melissa Brubaker 13:52
Yeah. Would you say that working affected school as well?

Fernando Armenta 14:00
Working?

Melissa Brubaker 14:01
Because you worked at a young age, and going to school as well, was that hard to balance? Like, could that possibly have affected your school work?

Fernando Armenta 14:12
Well, I think it's not so much—it did have a positive effect on us, those of us that had to do those—earn extra money, because for the most part, people that had—we're better off—had the things that we didn't have. So we had to, like—money to go to the movies, our families do not have money to go to the movies.

Melissa Brubaker 14:49
Right.

Fernando Armenta 14:49
And for the most part, so you would have to look at ways to figure out how to get to the movies. You know, selling newspaper, shining shoes, those kinds of things. I went—there used to be a bakery downtown here—I think it stopped probably in the 80s, early 80s, late 70s—called Ramona's Bakery. It used to be on Main Street. There used to be one over—it started off over here on East Alisal. I think there's a Chinese restaurant down here on—so, around ten, eleven, or twelve, I was working down there, like, come in at five in the morning and washed pots and pans. And for two, three hours, I'd walk out with not a whole lot of money, maybe ten dollars.

Melissa Brubaker 15:49
And you mentioned your dad working in Spreckels, but can you also tell me what your mother or other siblings were doing during the time?

Fernando Armenta 15:56
My mother was working at Spiegels. She was working at some other packing sheds over on Abbott Street. Two of my older brothers were actually a little bit older, so they were able to get a work permit because they were older, able to get a work permit during the summer and actually go to work in the fields, and once in a while on Saturdays during the school year. So they were able to get eight hours a day versus—mine was only maybe four hours a week at the most. Let's see what else. That's about it.

In terms of selling a newspaper and shining shoes, there was only about two or sometimes three in the whole family that would end up doing something like that. Plus, around the age of twelve and fourteen, I worked down there at [unclear] Tortilla Bakery on West Market. So, I would go in at four in the morning, just work from four to five in the morning till about ten o'clock at night, and ten o'clock in the morning, and then package tortillas.

Melissa Brubaker 17:27
Right. And would you say it was hard to find a job during that time?

Fernando Armenta 17:34
It was—not so much—is getting—having—I forget the age of having a work permit. I think it was, if I'm not mistaken, you had to be at least thirteen to get a work permit.

Melissa Brubaker 17:47
Right, so—

Fernando Armenta 17:48
So, yeah. And so, you know, some of us couldn't wait that long. So, some folks didn't require work permit. They like that we're willing to do whatever they asked us to do at the tortilla factory or the bakery. Yeah.

Melissa Brubaker 18:08
And going back to your siblings, I never caught—asked you how many siblings you actually have. So, I was wondering how much?

Fernando Armenta 18:15
There was twelve of us, so I was about in the middle.

Melissa Brubaker 18:18
Oh, that's a lot. [laughs]

Fernando Armenta 18:20
Yeah, it is. So we lived in—first house I was raised at is 156 Archer, which is now apartments that is the backside of Sacred Heart School. Actually, the field is the property line to the back of the house where we used to live in. So that was an old, rundown—half of a old Victorian house that was falling apart and falling down. So we were there to— probably I was maybe eleven, twelve. And then we moved over to 109 Capitol Street here, which is now a beauty salon. So we were there—I think that was a—almost a two-bedroom home with that many children.

Melissa Brubaker 19:26
That's a lot of children.

Fernando Armenta 19:27

So, like, four or five of us slept in one room, and the others slept in like two beds in the living room. And then there was like a mini dining area that wasn't really a dining area, that was connected to the front of the house, which is probably half of the size of this office and probably had another two beds.

Melissa Brubaker 19:55
That is a very small space.

Fernando Armenta 19:57
And they only had one restroom and one bathtub.

Melissa Brubaker 20:06
Yeah, and how was it like accommodating that space with that many children around?

Fernando Armenta 20:17
Well, I wasn't so much concerned about accommodating, because we spent a lot of time playing at Roosevelt School, Central Park, Sacred Heart School, riding our bikes a lot outside, out in the neighborhood, you know, playing marbles. We couldn't—our parents couldn't afford to buy us any toys, so how do we have a good time outside? So, obviously couldn't get a hold of a bike, couldn't buy us a bike, so we got creative and found pieces of wood, like, one by two woods, pieces of wood, and then we found a way to find some roller skates, metal roller skates, and we ended up making our own little, like, roller skate wagons, and so that's the way we enjoyed ourselves. That and marbles. Whenever we could find someone in the neighborhood that would have a tetherball, we'd go to the school. You know, it's—swimming is go down to that little—they turned the little fish fountain that used to be down at Central Park, turned into, like, a swimming little area. It was only about, probably a foot deep. But, you know, we were small and so a foot was like three feet to adults now. [Melissa laughs] So, yeah.

Melissa Brubaker 22:01
And so, the playing in this neighborhood—how was it like playing around that neighborhood? Was there—was it okay?— not okay, but—

Fernando Armenta 22:12
It was completely safe. Completely safe.

Melissa Brubaker 22:16
Yeah, compared to now?

Fernando Armenta 22:18
Yeah, completely safe. There wasn't a whole lot of kids playing in that area to begin with, and we were just all spread out, and we played over a half a day down at Central Park. It was really nothing to eat or drink till we got home, and just hope there was something left—something at home to eat when we got there.

Melissa Brubaker 22:45
Right. And getting older—you said you graduated from Salinas High School?

Fernando Armenta 22:55
Uh-huh.

Melissa Brubaker 22:55
And so from there, what do you do after Salinas High School?

Fernando Armenta 22:59
Actually, in 1968, you know, I got drafted into the US Army. My older brother, he got drafted in '65. So by the time—then my second to the oldest brother, he actually signed up to go to the Navy, so he went into US Navy in '64, so he was getting out in '68. And my younger brother Jesse, he had just graduated in June of 1968. By July, he was already in boot camp in the Marines, so down in San Diego. So I got drafted and went to boot camp in November of 1968 and went to the state of Washington, came back to Fort Ord for a couple of months. And then my oldest brother was already in Vietnam. And then my younger brother Jess was—he was already in Vietnam for a couple of months. So they originally sent me to the island of Okinawa. I didn't like it there, so I asked to drop my draft status and sign up to go regular Army. That's the only way I would get to go to Vietnam. So I did that. So I got sent to Vietnam in June of 1969, and then came back a year later. We all came back except my oldest brother stayed there for five years, because he volunteered to stay that long. I came back and then I got assigned to be at Fort Ord for about six months, and then I got sent back to Okinawa to spend my last year. And so I got out in January 1972.

Melissa Brubaker 24:58
Right. And you mentioned you didn't like that area where you were first drafted to, and I was wondering, why is it that you didn't like it so much?

Fernando Armenta 25:05
First of all, I had two brothers in Vietnam, and I felt like I needed to be near them. And I felt guilty and responsible for being in this safe area, and they were both in a combat zone. So I just didn't feel well. And so, I felt like I needed to do my part like them.

Melissa Brubaker 25:23
Right. And how was it like actually being a part of the Army?

Fernando Armenta 25:30
Well, for me it was a time where you have a lot of time to think. You have a lot of time to grow up, and sort of find and understand who you are at that time, in terms of your personality. I like making decisions for myself. I like being able to have the opportunity to have choices in life about different things. So I've learned to accept and respect responsibility. And so I was—1968, I was twenty years old. So, in '72, I was twenty-three and a half when I got out of the army.

Melissa Brubaker 26:38
You got out pretty early.

Fernando Armenta 26:40
Yeah.

Melissa Brubaker 26:41
Yeah. And so, what branch were you actually in the Army?

Fernando Armenta 26:46
US Army.

Melissa Brubaker 26:47
The US Army?

Fernando Armenta 26:48
Yes. So, you have five branches.

Melissa Brubaker 26:51
Right.

Fernando Armenta 26:51
Okay.

Melissa Brubaker 26:53
And so, it was more, like, in action or, like, behind the scenes?

Fernando Armenta 27:00
A lot behind the scenes. I think that there's a great possibility that if I would have been on the frontlines, like, my son in Iraq, I probably—I may not be here today.

Melissa Brubaker 27:21
That's quite interesting. Yeah, you got out lucky.

Fernando Armenta 27:25
Yes.

Melissa Brubaker 27:26
Yeah. And so with that in mind, so when you came back from the Army, what is it that you wanted to do?

Fernando Armenta 27:35
I actually didn't know what I wanted to do. I wasn't motivated in high school. I wasn't motivated by education. For some reason, education was a difficult thing for me to handle, to be disciplined about, because I think I—growing up into the age of eighteen, nineteen, is—that wasn't important for me. To me, what was more important is learning how to survive and having something to eat. And so that take took on a more importance in priority. The Army experience shook me up and said, well, you're gonna

have to eventually find something and find yourself a good, well, a consistent paying job. And hopefully, because of that, you will decide what kind of work you want to do in the future. So, when I got out in January of 1972 from the US Army—first of all, before I got out of the army, I was promoted to a sergeant, so I got responsibility. So I got to be a section leader, platoon leader, and so I learned to have people answer to me, which is—that's kind of interesting. You know, so I learned not to take advantage of it, but more or less learn from it, and be able to be fair and flexible to folks. And before that I—my last year in the Army, I gained a lot of recognition and respect from my commanding officer and also higher ranking sergeants, because I took my leadership position as a sergeant respectively and never abused it in any way possible. So I learned to gain the respect of civilians in Okinawa that used to work under me, and also to the other lower ranking Army enlisted men, so I was able to get a lot of things done, because I wasn't strict. I didn't like punishing folks for making mistakes.

Melissa Brubaker 30:23
Yeah.

Fernando Armenta 30:24
And I was more into giving people an opportunity to learn from their mistakes and be able to correct them and end up being a better, responsible soldier.

Melissa Brubaker 30:36
That's very well, yeah.

Fernando Armenta 30:38
So, I came back, and somebody told me I could go to Hartnell College and get paid for it, get the GI stipend, educational bill. So I tried that out, and one thing led to another. I was there two years, then transferred in 1974 to San Diego State, was there for two years and got my bachelor's. So I went from the least—well, backing up to Salinas High. For Salinas High, I could not graduate on time, so I had to go back and get my high school diploma. So I was probably the least—one of the least motivated brothers and sisters in my family that didn't take high school seriously. And that had something to do with me not graduating on time. So some of my other brothers and sisters graduated on time, and their GPA, grade point average, was a lot higher than mine. So I said, those would be the brothers and sisters, two or three or four, that will go off and get a college degree before me and graduate with a degree way ahead of time, way before me.

Melissa Brubaker 32:06
Right.

Fernando Armenta 32:08
But I ended up being the first one. So, I came back, went to Hartnell, went to San Diego State, came back, got married in 1976. And then a year later, I went to graduate school at San Jose State for two years. My GPA went from 2.3, which is pretty low—

Melissa Brubaker 32:32
Yeah.

Fernando Armenta 32:33
—to when I graduated, 3.5.

Melissa Brubaker 32:35
That is very high, very hard to achieve.

Fernando Armenta 32:38
And so, when I got interviewed to go to graduate school, at graduate school, at Fresno State and at Berkeley and also San Jose State—San Jose State is any graduate students entering graduate school with a GPA of anything less than 3.0, which is a B, right? B grade. So, they said when they interviewed me, he says, "Fernando, you have some good community experience. You worked as a probation aide back in '72, here in Salinas for the probation department. You came back from San Diego State, and you worked at Friends Outside, working with folks coming out of prison, helping them find jobs. And then you're involved with the farmworkers movement here in Salinas, and then also down when you were in San Diego." So, what I did in San Diego, the summer of '75, 1975, I gave up my whole summer. When you go to summer school, I mean, I had two jobs and I gave all that up to go work full time as an organizer for the United Farmworkers Union at that time. And at that time, they would pay you only like twenty dollars a week.

Melissa Brubaker 34:11
That's very low.

Fernando Armenta 34:13
Yes.

Melissa Brubaker 34:13
So what made you decide to work for that?

Fernando Armenta 34:17
Because I liked—I got more involved as a supporter and volunteer with Cesar Chavez in the farmworkers union, and my wife at that time was—I met her in '73, so she was, like, a girlfriend to me. And so she was working in the fields at that time, full time, picking grapes here in southern Monterey County. And so I just liked the power of advocacy. And I liked the power of politics as a way to put pressure on folks and make decisions about the conditions of farmworkers. And to this day, that still goes on. And it's a—the farmers movement is—membership is really low. But the movement has changed thousands and millions of Americans across this country. They've learned a lot from the farmworkers political and civil rights movement. So it's by no accident that next Monday—you may have heard about it—President Barack Obama is going to the United Farmworkers headquarters in Keene, California, to recognize the monument and museum of Cesar Chavez.

Melissa Brubaker 36:08
Right. And so, with working with the organization, were you working directly with Cesar?

Fernando Armenta 36:17
Cesar is—I was one of his little foot soldiers. So, you would get assigned in a different city throughout the country. So Cesar was all over the state of California. He was all over the fields. So I was assigned to work in the southeast portion of San Diego, a barrio called Logan Heights—mostly Mexican Americans and African Americans. So I was assigned to work in the boycott at that time, the boycott of non-union grapes, and the boycott of Gallo wine. So that was my job, is to get—to organize volunteers and students to get all the non-union grapes out of the supermarkets, and to get all the Gallo wine out of the liquor stores. So I did that for a whole summer. And it proved to be very successful.

Melissa Brubaker 37:20
Right.

Fernando Armenta 37:21
Yes.

Melissa Brubaker 37:22
And how was it exactly working—trying to get everyone to boycott?

Fernando Armenta 37:26
Well, most folks when you tell them and explain to them about the plight of farmworkers and the conditions in which farmworkers live and work, when you tell them in those days about—a lot of times in those days, there was no bathrooms in the fields. There was no clean drinking water in the fields. There was mistreatment by foremans and supervisors. The wages were really low. So the farmer had too much discretion to treat farmworkers like slaves.

Melissa Brubaker 38:25
And so that's how you would tell everyone to boycott?

Fernando Armenta 38:32
Yes, and folks—I said, "Do you care about the folks that put the food and fruit on your table? Does it matter to you whether they have clean and safe working conditions, or living working conditions? Does it concern you that they have no drinking water or running water in the labor camps? Does it matter to you that they live in labor camps like cattle, or like sardines?" And for the most part, most folks supported the farmworkers. They supported the boycott.

Melissa Brubaker 39:22
Right. And was that their first response to support, or were some of them just like, "No, we don't care"?

Fernando Armenta 39:30
Even today, you will find folks that either because they have not lived to be poor, or they have not learned to sacrifice themselves, that it doesn't matter to them, because they got what they want.

Melissa Brubaker 39:57

And with other organizations in mind, can you describe to me other organizations you have done in the past?

Fernando Armenta 40:07
Well, I've been a member of the LULAC, of the League of United Latin American Citizens, up until a year ago. I was probably a thirty-year member here at one of the councils—20—numbers 2055. So, coming back from college, I got involved in meetings and raised money for scholarships for high school students, got involved with speaking against the city of Salinas about police brutality, the lack of affordable housing in Salinas. So, in 1979 or '80, a small group of us got together in East Salinas and said, folks at school boards—there ain't no Mexican Americans on school boards. There ain't no Mexican Americans on the Salinas City Council. There ain't no Mexican American as mayor of Salinas. There ain't no Mexican Americans on the board of supervisors. And it went on and on and on. So, count how many we are today, in 2012, county wide. County wide, from school board all the way to state assembly, you'll probably find close to thirty of us now. Thirty.

Melissa Brubaker 41:42
That's a lot compared to then.

Fernando Armenta 41:44
Yes. So, you know, 1979 or '80, some of us—if the farmworkers could organize themselves into a union, and if we're—we've been told throughout our life, "You Mexican Americans will never go to college. You'll never be successful." Not told all the time, but just the impression they leave with us. So, a lot of us went to college and came back. Some of us came back with BA degrees. Some of us came back with master degrees. Some of us came back as lawyers. Some of us came back as doctors. Some of us came back as—a lot came back as teachers. So we approached City Hall and said, "Do you have a plan to hire more people of color?" And the reaction we got from the city council and mayor and city manager, that's not our priority. That is not our interests. So we tried to do it through the process. So we said—we didn't say this, I'm just imagining what led us to—is we live in America. America is full of democracy and opportunities. So if they won't listen to us, and they're in a position of determining what's best for us in terms of services, police services, fire services, other kinds of services in the city and in the school district. If they don't listen to us as Mexican American parents about the way they teach and support our children in the schools, then how can we go about changing that? Well, we go meet with them, but they won't listen to us. We did meetings, year after meeting, year after meeting. We finally realize, you know, there are so called appointed and elected leaders. They don't have very much education as much as we do. Maybe some of them do. So we said, "What's this thing about voter registration?" And so, there was a group, a leadership voter registration suit—it's called the Southwest Voter Registration Project, out of San Antonio, Texas. Two of their leaders came to Salinas and said, "Are you having problems with getting access to services? Are you having problems with people listening to your concerns and needs?" "Yes." "Do you want to change that?" "What do you think we've been doing the last couple years?"

Melissa Brubaker 45:21
Right.

Fernando Armenta 45:22
He says, "Well, the way to change that is, if the powers to be don't want to listen, and they don't want to respond, then learn to put yourself in their position." I say, "What do you mean? How can that happen?" "Register your people to vote." "Okay, we did a whole summer and registered a couple thousand in East Salinas. Now, what do we do?" "Now you must learn how to go about finding people to run for office, for school board, and eventually the city council." So we started to get a few folks on the Alisal School Board. 1981—Jesse Sanchez, Alex Martinez, a Native American, Paul Cushman. And then we said, city council. So we ran Jesse Sanchez in 1985, and this is before the city's, city of Salinas, was at a system electing their councilmember by district boundaries. It was in a large system. So, a couple of us folks with the Mexican American Legal Foundation said, and LULAC said, "Let's file a federal lawsuit against the city of Salinas that it was violating certain sections of the 1964 Voting Rights Act." And we did, and we got an attorney to be, like, pro bono to us. And 1988, the city of Salinas decided to settle. They had—they needed three plaintiffs. You know what plaintiffs are? Sort of names they use in courts, and in court cases after them. So there was myself, Supervisor Simón Salinas, and [unclear]. So, the federal voting rights case in federal court was named Armenta versus Salinas. So Salinas is the city of Salinas. So why did they choose my last name? It's because my name was supposedly the first letter in the alphabet, so they used that. So the city council was resistive and said, "Well, we don't want to make the decision. We don't want to fight you in court anymore. Why don't we let the voters decide?" Because we tried to run people, and for over twenty years, or thirty years, or forty years, all the city council members and mayors for the City Council of Salinas came from South Salinas. So no Latinos before that, before 1989, would stand a chance to be successful and win an election for North Salinas, but even more so East Salinas. So the city council said, "Let the voters decide." So they were throwing us back to the lions. But what happened in November of 1988—I don't know if you were born then.

Melissa Brubaker 49:03
Not yet. [laughs]

Fernando Armenta 49:05
We had a presidential election. Dukakis was running against—who was running? I'm not sure who was running at that time. Michael Dukakis—who was the Republican? I can't recall. Anyway, that was in November 1988. But what happened is, two or three months before that, the city council set December 6, 1988, after the presidential election, to have a special election. And you see that poster up there? I said December 6, 1988, right?

Melissa Brubaker 49:48
Right.

Fernando Armenta 49:48
So right after the [unclear], the city had a special election to decide if they wanted to go to districts. So the rest of the city that was anti people of color, we caught them off guard, or they were caught off guard, and they didn't give them enough time to organize to run a strong counter campaign against district elections. That measure won by 107 or 137 votes. They all came from East Salinas. And so they won by that amount. So within six months, in June of 1989, for the first time a Mexican American was elected to the City Council of Salinas, 1989. And that was Simón Salinas. Then two years later, District

6 came up in the city council in North Salinas, and over where I live on Rider, District 1 came up. I think Anna had an opponent. No one filed against me. So I ran and I was successful. So me and her got elected to the City Council. So within a two year period, it went from zero having Mexican Americans on the city council to three. And there's six plus the mayor, the seven votes. So we were one vote shy of having the majority within a two year period.

Melissa Brubaker 51:26
That's a very short time.

Fernando Armenta 51:26
Yeah. So we were at that time, an emerging political power base in Salinas. So we had a lot of people nervous. People that could care less about Mexican Americans. And it was a good, happy time during those years. What happened in '93, two years later, the fourth district came up. And that was Laurel Heights. So guess what happened?

Melissa Brubaker 51:40
What?

Fernando Armenta 51:52
Gloria De La Rosa got elected to the City Council. So what did that mean? That was in '93. Simón ran for the Board of Supervisors when we went to district elections in '93. So he had to vacate his seat on the City Council after four years—no, a little bit more than four years. So Roberto Ocampo ran, and he won. So in June of 1993, within a four year span, we went from zero Mexican Americans on the City Council to four. And we were the majority. That scared a lot of folks. They thought it was a Mexican Revolution. [Melissa laughs] No, really, really. And we were not going to use the same tactics and same approaches and quote unquote, the same racism that they did with us, or classism. You know, we were just—that was not in our nature to do that. Our nature was to learn to be responsible and respectable and credible city council members. And that's what we did.

Melissa Brubaker 53:47
So with having the power of being the supervisor and all the previous experience of organizing, have you used that for Chinatown or the area around it?

Fernando Armenta 54:01
I believe that I haven't aggressively looked for it. When I was on the City Council, you know, you have the Buddhist temple [unclear] committee meeting to hand the Franciscan brothers, Robert Smith, and a few other folks, and they just said, "Salinas, we've got to find a better way how to reenergize, remobilize." Who's interested in reinvesting, in investing into Chinatown? You know, nothing's moved there in twenty years. You know, there's not—there never was enough redevelopment dollars in the private sector. Like, it's a Battle of the Titans. Twenty years ago, I was talking about how do we move the homeless shelter into somewhere else and give them what they need? I haven't followed the details in the last few years. I could be wrong. It hasn't gone anywhere. So I remember going down to Dorothy's Place. Six years ago, Robert Smith and somebody else invited me down there, and so I went down and met with them. I said, "What do you need from me?" So you kind of feel like the behavioral

health and mental health department doesn't assign a social worker down there. And so what can you do, Mr. Armenta, to help us with that. So I call the health department, behavioral health and I say, you know, "You gotta find a way to take care of business down there, okay?" At that time, we used to have the mobile homeless van. Last couple of years, I haven't tracked to see whether that still exists. At that time, they—when I was a medical social worker at Natividad Medical Center, before I came here for fourteen years, I used to see a lot of homeless people come into the hospital I had to personally attend to and service to, and find a place for them to live once they left the hospital. So I did that on a full time basis before I became a county supervisor, fourteen years while I was on the City Council. So I've had very few opportunities. If somebody came here with a proposal—but it's always about the private sector, because there's never going to be enough public dollars to just completely remodel that whole area, you know. And it's unfortunate that there's too much bureaucracy, and there's too much BS. I mean, I say that in public, but I just said it on camera. That's okay. If folks came to me with a proposal, where it's a joint collaborative proposal between the city, the county of Monterey, and the private sector, this is what we need from you. I have no hesitation to take a look at it. And if it looks pretty good, and we have resources, and we have money, I will be one not to hesitate from moving forward. Okay, and I haven't seen that proposal. And I remember five or six years ago, they used to have this downtown social service board. They may still do. And Gloria De La Rosa—you should get on it or somebody else should get—for what? Because they were having a lot of internal conflict on the board, or they couldn't really come to a team consensus of how to collaborate and work together. It was my assumption that I was drawing from having these conversations. I would talk to Gloria or talk to the Director of Social Services when he first came here from the county, Elliott Robinson. And I would tell the City Council and the Mayor, "Tell me what you want from the county. Okay, just tell me. And you got to talk to others on the Board of Supervisors. And if we can do it, let's move it forward. I haven't seen nothing in the last four or five years regarding Chinatown. Of course, I went down there last year. The Asian Festival. That's nice. That's great. Didn't have that ten or twenty years ago. That's great. It's fine. It still looks like Chinatown. It still looks like a lost city.

Melissa Brubaker 59:36
So, if someone did propose to you something five years ago, do you think it would have made a difference?

Fernando Armenta 59:52
It depends on what kind of plan and proposal it would have been.

Melissa Brubaker 59:58
Right.

Fernando Armenta 1:00:00
Because even if you do it in phases—now, we can go down to right now, or we can go down five years ago. And if you compare it—or ten years ago—physically there ain't much of a difference. There isn't. The whole thing is lopsided. I see this community garden down there. It's fine. They have Dorothy's Kitchen, but other than that, the street is not alive. The only thing that's alive with it is a bunch of unfortunate situations of human beings down there that are dilapidated in life. Because there's nowhere else to go to. And I speak from personal experience. I have a brother-in-law down there. He's been in

and out of prison. He's not a murderer. He's not anything like that. He's just a drug addict. The system and the state has not learned how to take care of those folks. We're barely starting now with AB 109. But he just learns to manage out there. There's no way we're going to be able to clean up homelessness on a permanent basis unless it's really a permanent plan and resources, and there's not. Sure, everybody gets excited. We all have a commitment. Yeah. But when it comes down to it, where's the commitment? Where's the implementation? Where's the resources? All these other things that people do, they're nice. I help—to get to stay in a different church. That's better than nothing. But you know, is that really a permanent fix? We all know it's not. We're grateful that the churches do those things. But it's just a bandaid.

Melissa Brubaker 1:02:19
And you mentioned how there wasn't no—how there was a Asian Festival, but was there anything else besides there in Chinatown a long time ago?

Fernando Armenta 1:02:34
No, just Chinatown after—starting in 1980, it just started to fall apart, probably the time when Fort Ord was majorly starting to scale down and close down, because you used to find a lot of Army soldiers down there too.

Melissa Brubaker 1:03:01
Right. Coming from CSUMB, I'm curious to know, like, what happened in Fort Ord as well. Like, what was it—over there?

Fernando Armenta 1:03:17
I haven't—to be honest with you, I don't follow the details of Fort Ord.

Melissa Brubaker 1:03:20
Oh, okay.

Fernando Armenta 1:03:23
You know, I sit on a transit board, Monterey-Salinas Transit for fifteen years, so you just got to make sure we take care of the students and folks that live at Fort Ord, and we're always—we need to always look for better ways how to provide when the opportunity occurs, and it's occurring right now—better accessible and affordable transit services for everyone that lives and works and goes to school at Fort Ord. So, we've made a lot of progress in the last five years. Can we make more? We'll just wait for those opportunities to come. I mean—go ahead.

Melissa Brubaker 1:04:11
I was gonna ask if there's anything else you'd like to tell me about Chinatown.

Fernando Armenta 1:04:26
No. It's still a depressing, sad place. If you've been down there, spend any fair amount of time—I don't know what that's—fair amount of time is—you can understand why folks gravitate down there. The other thing I didn't tell you is one of my oldest sisters died on the streets of Salinas as a heroin addict.

Melissa Brubaker 1:05:08
I'm sorry to hear that.

Fernando Armenta 1:05:09
She used to hang around down there a lot. So if I go down there right now, some of the old timers down there and especially some of the—few ladies down there. "Fernando Armenta, oh, are you Terry's brother?" My sister was named Teresa. Oh, they had a—I forget her nickname. They had a nickname [unclear]. "I remember Terry, Teresa. She was a great person. She was a nice person." But her problem was heroin. She could—for twenty years she could never kick that habit. You know, so she was in and out of prison a lot too, but for things like petty theft. And then I—coming out of grad school went to go work for Community Human Services project, and it had a [unclear] Methadone clinic where the post office is on Sanborn. I worked there five years. I worked five years with—the only people I saw was nothing—on a daily basis, is nothing but heroin addicts. That was a big challenge.

Melissa Brubaker 1:06:22
Was there any other siblings involved with Chinatown?

Fernando Armenta 1:06:29
Probably some of my other brothers went in and out selling newspapers. I think my oldest brother was the one, like, going down there because he got a lot of tips shining shoes, you know. And then the farm labor buses used to come and park on the corner of Pajaro and Market Street in those days, back in the 60s. And the corner of Pajaro and Market where there's condominiums now? That used to be the former Swinging Door where the homeless folks used to hang out, before Dorothy's kitchen got positioned over in Chinatown.

Melissa Brubaker 1:07:14
Right. So what'd they used to do there?

Fernando Armenta 1:07:19
Just hang out like they do right now at the Dorothy's Kitchen.

Melissa Brubaker 1:07:22
Okay. And I'm curious to know, was there any resources available there?

Fernando Armenta 1:07:30
Not at the Swinging Door. Not compared to what there is now. So, I'll be honest and frank with you. I have not looked at service wise, not because I don't want to. What are we doing for the homeless population now today? Okay, we've got the I-HELP. We've got Dorothy's Kitchen. I need to, you know, go back and look at—where's the homeless mobile van that was around six, ten years ago, when there was a great focus on HIV and AIDS? We used to have that. You don't hear much of that in the last five or eight years. So, you know, we get this sometimes homeless annual report from social services and the Homeless Coalition, but—that's fine. I'm more concerned about practically, what are you actually doing? And how many people are you impacting their lives? It's not that I'm not interested. There has to

be a process. There has to be meetings. There has to be planning. And not to sound disrespectful—I won't say this in public, but I'm on camera—I don't care about stuff like that. What I care about is we should be doing more to directly provide permanent housing for homeless folks and families and children, and services. We could do better. Okay.

Melissa Brubaker 1:09:34
And do you think with renewing Chinatown, such as maybe making an exhibit out of, like—I think they want to make an exhibit out of the Republic Cafe—do you think that could possibly make a difference?

Fernando Armenta 1:09:49
No. To some extent. But they've been talking about that for twenty years. It's kind of looking at—what's taking so long?

Melissa Brubaker 1:10:01
Right.

Fernando Armenta 1:10:02
What's taking so long? If people that have resources, people that are wealthy—I'm not saying some of them don't care—if they put their mind to it, if they put their mind and passion, or compassion, in Chinatown, it can happen. Locally, nationally, it could happen. Sometimes I think—not to be critical—you don't have the right people involved. I belong to the Vietnam Memorial. I don't know if you've seen that over on Laurel Drive, up by the soccer fields? A Vietnam Memorial Monument for Vietnam veterans

Melissa Brubaker 1:10:55
I possibly have.

Fernando Armenta 1:10:57
So, I've been part of that committee for fifteen years. So, for ten years, politely and respectfully, we were farting around. We only had flagpoles. We only had eight acres for seventy-eight people that gave their lives to Vietnam. So, when I became a county supervisor almost twelve years ago—no, let me back up. The year before I left the City Council, in the year 2000, the city got a hold of, like, eight million dollars, and we needed to spend it on one-time projects. And I'd say, "Why don't you dedicate 1.2 million dollars to the Veteran's Memorial in the Veteran's Park out there." They said no to the memorial, but yes to the park. So if you look at the lower part of the park, there's a half a million dollars worth of what you see there. It's beautiful. But who led that charge? Yours truly. Of course, I don't like taking credit. But five years ago, I got tired of us farting around at the Vietnam Memorial. We had three pieces of plywood nailed together, painted with the American flag. And it was decaying plywood with over 20,000 veterans, 30,000 veterans in Monterey County. And we only had flagpoles, and that piece of plywood that was decaying. So, I was a county supervisor. I've got—I proposed, let's get five members of the committee. And I'm one of the five. "No one seems to care about us Vietnam veterans." "Oh yeah? Well, let's find out." So I called five companies out there: two or three ag, one big ag company out of the three, one wine company, vineyard company, one construction company. And we took them out there. Meet me out there two o'clock, three o'clock in the afternoon or whatever. Took them up on the hill up there. And I told them on the phone, "What are you interested in? I want you to take a look at

what we have. And then tell us if you can help us." "What do you want to do?" We want to build some sort of permanent monument." I don't know if I have—let me—I have a picture of it over there. "We want to build a permanent monument." "What does it look like? How is it shaped?" "We don't know yet." I took them out there. They looked around. They says, "At least you got eight acres. Got a twenty-five year lease between the city and county." They left. So, the major ag company a week later called and said, "I'm willing to give $110,000 interest free loan for ten years." We needed 180 or 200,000. Then we got 110, another 30 or 40— $60,000. It went up to practically $200,000. So within six months, Wallace Memorial here in Salinas that designs memorials for cemeteries came to join us. He start saying, "I can find three pieces of large black granite from Crystal City, Minnesota." They trucked them here. Two days to truck them here. And we got Don Chapin to pull up a crane, and they were shaped into a waving flag, and it stood, like, fourteen, sixteen feet high, and sixteen, twenty feet wide. And on the bottom you'll see if you ever go up there, the seventy-eight names and it's painted the red, white, and blue.

Melissa Brubaker 1:12:43
Very nice.

Fernando Armenta 1:13:46
Right. I'm trying to figure out [unclear] subject. Getting closer to him.

Melissa Brubaker 1:16:35
Would you like to show us all the pictures you have around?

Fernando Armenta 1:16:39
No, I just had a card, but maybe it's not here. It was a—it's a card that folks gave out for fundraising for the Vietnam Memorial. Yeah, it's only a picture of that. It may not even be here. I think I may have them somewhere else. Anything else?

Melissa Brubaker 1:17:32
Well, kind of going back into when you were mentioning going into college and what not. In my mind, I was thinking before, like, what made you interested from going to Hartnell into San Diego. So, I just want to ask, like, what made you interested?

Fernando Armenta 1:17:53
There was nothing, I mean, what made help me decide to go to San Diego versus anywhere else?

Melissa Brubaker 1:18:00
Mm-hmm.

Fernando Armenta 1:18:11
No specific reason. No specific reason. I had just—I had heard they had a very active Latino—in those days, we referred to us, each other, as Chicanos. And very active Mexican American history department, Chicano studies department. I heard about—I used to belong to the student college group called MEChA, that's maybe at—I think it's at CSUMB, Hartnell, maybe some of the other places. it was

very—they had a very large and active MEChA chapter of Mexican American Student Union. And to me that was very—I was looking forward to being part of them, because they were in large—in hundreds of numbers. There were probably going to be a lot of interesting political things to do, and that's one of the reasons why I chose San Diego State. I wasn't sure—just making this up—that we were going to be, like, Pancho Villa riding horses back and forth from the border. [laughs] So, I heard they were very progressive politically, and I liked that. And they were—I was hearing they were well known, highly respected. So I figured, go and get an education, politically learn how to grow more, and I think eventually it would have—it would help me shape what kind of future I was going to have in whatever community I lived in, but I always knew I was going to come back to Salinas. Yeah.

Melissa Brubaker 1:20:17
What made you want to come back to Salinas?

Fernando Armenta 1:20:20
Well, Salinas is—most of my family is here, and my brothers and sisters are here. At that time, my girlfriend Noemi was in Soledad. She was in this area, so I, you know, I said—I figured that without knowing details, without a clearly defined intent, the kind of difference I would eventually end up making for Salinas and Monterey County. District elections is—changed the face in the internal life of Monterey County, whether folks want to recognize it or appreciate it. You know, so last night, I was walking neighborhoods for my reelection, and I ran into two young Latinas in their mid-30s. They work for a dentist office. Of course, my job was to let them know who I am, what I've done or not done. And they've got thirty-three days to decide if they want to vote for me or not. So I had to get to know folks I didn't know. So I told them a little bit about myself. And then I said, "I don't know you two ladies, but you seem to have a fair amount of common sense, and you seem to be mature, and you seem to be two caring persons. The other thing is I like the smile on your face too." And they were very humble, and they were very peaceful. And I said, "Folks like you should learn to—at least one of you, if not two of you—does any of you like politics?" And the oldest one said, "Yes, me. But I need to learn, quote unquote, what it's all about." Well, the way you learn it, is you come out and volunteer, whether it's for me or someone else, or something else. Get involved politically in your community, because I and others close to my age that are elected officials ain't gonna be around forever, don't have very much time to go. So who's gonna take their place? So that's why I say, do it sooner than later. Get exposed. You can come and help me. I'll show you how to knock on doors. It's no—nothing special about it. Learn to do it. Learn to be politically brave. And why can't you run for school board? Why can't you run for city council? Why can't you run for mayor? Why can't you run for the county? And on and on and on. Somebody has to do it, you know. So those are things that for me are very encouraging, to have these kinds of discussions. And, you know, I tell people, I work no miracles. No one works miracles. It's—the only thing we can do is—not the only thing, but learn to take our job and our responsibility seriously, and work hard. Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to make new friends. Don't be afraid to lose friends, because in the world of politics it's gonna happen, whether you like it or not, you know. And the way you start making a significant difference in the world and in your community is learning to recognize and respect that this responsibility ain't just for you. This responsibility and position was bestowed upon you, and it belongs to the people. So much for a sermon.

Melissa Brubaker 1:25:50

[laughs] That's very empowering.

Fernando Armenta 1:25:52
Yeah.

Melissa Brubaker 1:25:56
Yeah, so I believe that's all my questions I have unless you want to tell me anything else.

Fernando Armenta 1:26:00
Wow, man, Jesus. It's an hour and twenty minutes, and we're gonna cut it right now. That's cool.

Melissa Brubaker 1:26:07
Yeah.

Fernando Armenta 1:26:07
No, I think your focus was more on how do we change and make Chinatown better. Wasn't that part of it?

Melissa Brubaker 1:26:17
Well, that and some—mainly how to do that is the focus on the history of it, to see people's story of it. And from there, we can [unclear] well, how can we make it better?

Fernando Armenta 1:26:33
Yeah, I think from a social work point of view, fourteen years as a medical social worker at Natividad Medical Center, for me, is for folks that live and hang around Chinatown, for those that ended up at Natividad Medical Center, that's how I touch Chinatown, is to be able to give those folks the support they need, which was very limited when they left the hospital. And so, if I could put them in a boarding care home until they recovered from their medical condition, I did so, even though they would get well, and they would get themselves back on their feet. And they would probably wind up in Chinatown again. But I found some that were with severe diabetes, for example, and were sixty or sixty-two years old, were undocumented, that were not legal residents. And they would come and go from Chinatown depending how safe it was during that month or that week, because a lot of folks didn't want to go down there. So they would leave the hospital, and I was starting to realize some—[unclear] they would leave and they would leave with only three days of medication for high blood pressure controlling their diabetes. They had no form of transportation, and some of these folks barely could walk well enough. So I saw a couple of those—a number of those cases come in over the years, quite a few. So how I helped out indirectly Chinatown, the people of Chinatown, is I would tell the doctors, let's place them in a boarding care home for a couple months. Get them stabilized, get them real well. Or let's figure out how Natividad Medical Center could do greater outreach into Chinatown. I think Dr. Marc Tunzi does one day clinics and has been for the last ten years or so down in Chinatown, down at Dorothy's Kitchen, you know. So just—let's figure out how to prevent people from getting admitted to the hospital. Let's find out ways. Let's place them in boarding care homes. Let's get them stabilized. These folks sometimes—I remember one time after six months, this one fellow was undocumented and we were paying him out of indigent funds, and he says, "Well, we can't do this. If we have to do it for one, we

have to do it for the world." But I was able to show—I could show you the costs of coming into the emergency room, going to an intensive care unit, going to the medical unit. You stabilize them in a week or ten days, and they have no insurance. Guess what—how much that cost? Close to a hundred-thousand dollars. So I said, "Get out of the indigent fund six hundred dollars, and place them in a boarding care home for a month. They'll get room and shelter, and they get meals. And you give them enough medication for three months so they can dispense it there. That will prevent multiple admissions at a hundred-thousand dollars. Don't you think that's cost savings?" "Oh, yeah." I'm not a financial wizard. I barely passed math in high school. Come on, folks. Come on, you know, so I—those are the things I would do for folks, you know. Little things like folks that didn't have a hearing aid. They didn't have a pay source, and Medi-Cal doesn't cover that, and the indigent fund doesn't cover a hearing aid. So I call the Lions Club. I call the Rotary. I call the Valley Hearing Aid Center. "Oh, yeah, we got some hearing aids here but, you know, takes $102 to repair them and make them usable. You find somebody to pay for us to fix them, we'll do it." I used to do things like that. And all those folks came from Chinatown, and over half of them went back to Chinatown. So, yeah, that's all.

Melissa Brubaker 1:32:00
Well, I would like to thank you for letting me interview you and have this discussion with you.

Fernando Armenta 1:32:05
Yeah.