TRANSCRIPTION RE:

CSUMB Founding Faculty
Oral History Project 1995-1998
Rina Benmayor, Project Director

Interview with Rina Benmayor, Professor Emerita
School of Humanities and Communication
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Interviewer, Frances Payne Adler, Professor Emerita
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Narrator: Rina Benmayor
Interviewer: Frances Payne Adler

Adler: We're here interviewing Rina Benmayor, an oral history, in Portland, Oregon. It's August 24, 2015. My name is Frances Payne Adler. We're here at my home. Rina, would you please say your full name and give us permission to use your oral history?

Benmayor: My name is Rina Benmayor. And yes, you have permission to use my oral history.

Adler: Well, we're here interviewing for the oral history of the founding faculty at CSU Monterey Bay. We all have a story about when we first came – heard about the job at CSUMB. Would you tell us your story?

[1:00] Benmayor: Okay. Well, I was working in New York at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies where I had been for about 13 years, doing oral histories. At that point I was kind of ready to make a job change, although I did not want to leave New York. But I was looking around for other options. I was looking to get back into teaching because my position was a Research Director position that did not involve teaching. A friend of mine from a long time ago, whom I met at Stanford, sent me an email saying, "There's this job at Monterey Bay. It looks like you're really suited for it." I looked at the job announcement. This must have been November or December of 2014. No, of 1994, rather. [Chuckles] I looked at it and I said, "Oh, wow, this is a job made for me!" Because it was interdisciplinary, it didn't put me into a pigeonhole, into a disciplinary pigeonhole. And it was in a part of California that would have a lot of Latino students. I was raised in California since I was twelve. I went to university here. I went to Berkeley. I taught at Stanford. So I kind of knew the area although I didn't really know Monterey all that well. So I said, "Well, what the hell, I'll apply." I wrote an application and I sent in all the materials that they wanted. [Chuckles] It's funny because I think I actually wrote it on a typewriter! When I looked at it years later I thought, "My goodness, this doesn't look like what we produce nowadays!" So I sent it in. I must have sent it in maybe in January, I

just don't remember exactly. January. February. And I didn't hear. I didn't hear. I didn't hear. Finally, somehow or another I must have looked online or something and I found that Cecilia Burciaga was working there, you know, was part of the planning team, I guess. I said, "Oh! Well, I know Cecilia from Stanford." I didn't know her really well and I must admit she was always sort of intimidating to me. [Chuckles] But I said, "I'll call her up and see what's going on there." So I called her up. This must have been in April. I said, "Cecilia, I don't know if you remember me?" She said, "Of course I remember you!" Okay. I said, "Well, you know, I applied for . . . . " And she said, "Well, we got 5,000 applications for 20 positions. And I said, "Oh, okay!" But let me look at it and find it and see how things are going." So this must have been late April. She called me back and she said that she had found my application and she was talking to somebody. Anyway, long story short, I ended up getting a phone call. I don't know if it was a phone call interview? That I don't remember. But I do remember that they asked me to come out for an interview on the Tuesday after Memorial Day weekend. So I flew out, and fortunately I have cousins who **[A 5:00]** live in Monterey, I mean Carmel and Pebble Beach and that area so I kind of combined it with a visit to family. I came out but I drove from the Bay Area. I rented a car and I drove down from the Bay Area. I must have gone to see Mary [Pratt] and Renato [Rosaldo] in Palo Alto first. And then I drove down. I arrived, I don't know, getting toward dark? Like around 8:30-ish, 9. I drove onto this Army base and I thought, "Oh, my God. It's like me? Here? Watch, they're going to offer me a job and then I'm going to have a terrible, soul-searching decision to make." [Laughs] Anyway, I found finally this Police office where they had keys, where they gave me a key to go out and stay in the housing. That's where they were putting me up. I got this key and I drove out and I thought I was following directions. And I kept driving and driving. There was nothing around but brush, you know, and scrub oak and I'm, "Where in the hell am I going? [Chuckles] Have I missed something here?" Finally I arrive at what looks like some houses. I found the place where I was supposed to stay and got in. They were nicely appointed. I mean they had all the basics. So I plopped down and I turned on the TV, because I was like in shock. I thought I would

decompress a little. So I put on the TV. I always go to PBS to see what's on and, low and behold! There was my Eastenders program! [Laughs] And I thought, "Oh, well, if you get Eastenders here maybe it's not so bad!" But going back to the decision to come. I had mixed emotions about leaving New York but I didn't have anything readily lined up in New York. And I am not someone who likes to be unemployed. Also at the time, I was part of the Latina Feminist Group. We were doing the book *Telling to Live*, and we had a retreat in Colorado, at Baca. We did our own writer's colony kind of thing.

[8:19] Adler: Can you back up and talk about who you talked to when you got to campus for the interview and what happened during the –

Benmayor: I will. I'll get to that.

Adler: Oh, okay. All right.

Benmayor: I got the offer in early June, I think it was, and this retreat was in the middle of June. So I went to the *mujeres* and I said, "This is what they've offered me and I don't know what to do." They encouraged me to take it, that it was a good opportunity. My mother was in Los Angeles and she was getting older and I thought, "Well, maybe it's time to be closer than a five-hour plane ride from New York." So I made the decision and I accepted the position. But backing up, about the interview, okay. So I was in this house. I was by myself. I didn't have a roommate for that period of time. I think it was just a couple of days, an overnight or something like that. The next morning I was told to go a couple of houses down to meet María de la Luz Reyes, who was going to be my host for the interview activities. So I did. And they were very cordial. They lived right next door to Steve Arvizu, who was the then Provost and the Founding Provost. They told me how to go to the interview place. I was being interviewed for a position in Service Learning! What did I know about Service Learning? [Laughs] I knew nothing! I mean I did a little searching on the Internet to find out a little bit, but I had no idea. But I did have a lot of experience working in community projects. So, I went to the interview. I figured "I'm okay if I get an interview. I do okay in interviews so there's a good chance here, maybe." So, I go to the interview and there were all these people

around the table. There was Marsha Moroh and Marian Penn, who was the Director of Service Learning at that time. Marsha Moroh was a founding faculty in the area of Computer Science, she hadn't become a Dean yet. I think Bill Head, who was one of the founding faculty in Science was there. There was a community guy. I think he was Filipino. And there was a student. It was a lot of people. Oh, there was also Mary Ellen Ashley who was at that point a Dean for Student Affairs or something like that. Anyway. There were all these people and so I had the interview. They asked me questions and I did okay. Years later Marsha confessed to me. . . I said, "I didn't know anything about Service Learning. She said, "It didn't matter, we needed people that we liked!" [Laughter] So, I didn't know that at the time, but I came from New York and she was from New York and she kind of liked me.

Adler: That's great.

[11:41] Benmayor: But anyway, I mean I did have a lot of credentials. And so they liked me and they offered me a position to be one of the first. . . . My assignment, which was very weird, was to be in Social and Behavioral Sciences because there was no Humanities formally constituted. I think in the interim months when I was waiting to hear back, they had hired a historian who was Cecilia O'Leary and a literature person who was Qun Wang. And Josina [Makau] was the Communications person and she was really pushing to have Humanities on the campus, because it was not in the original plan. Can you imagine that! Anyway, I was supposed to be located in Social and Behavioral Sciences but teaching Service Learning. So it was kind of ambiguous because the structure at that point was very overlapping. It was all these concentric circles that overlapped. Okay. So I went back to New York. I arranged to move some of my stuff. I didn't move all of it because the position I was offered was Full Professor but without tenure. I could come up for tenure at the end of the first year, that's what it [appointment letter] said. I thought, "Well, if I'm not secure here I'd better not move all my things from New York. So I just moved a few things and I had a friend staying in my apartment. I arrived, I guess it was early July for all these orientation meetings and it was very bizarre. I remember we were down in Building 86, which was a series

of prefab buildings that the Army had. These were Army buildings. I walk into this room that has a long table and about, I don't know, 30 chairs sitting around it, but they were old Army chairs, the really old ones. [Chuckles] Very heavy metal chairs. And the walls were papered with butcher paper with all kinds of notes scribbled on them and they didn't make any sense. I couldn't make heads or tails out of these notes. These were the planning faculty who had been meeting, the first group of, I guess, 13 people, I'm not sure. I walked in there and I sat down and I said, "Man, is this how you start a university?" [Laughs] It seemed so bizarre! They were bringing in pizza and donuts and all kinds of terrible food. So I was assigned to teach "Intro to Service Learning." But I was also given an office space in one of these four buildings that are attached, sort of like these pre-fab bungalows. The office space I was given was within the Social and Behavioral Sciences bungalow, I guess, and it was in a vault, in an arms vault! It had no ventilation. It had a huge metal door. And I was in there with another new faculty member named Robina Bhatti. We kind of looked at each other and I mean we started talking and stuff, but it was so weird to be in this vault. Outside the vault at a big table were three planning faculty who were hunched over planning the Social and Behavioral Sciences curriculum. It was Manuel Carlos, who was an anthropologist who came from Santa Barbara. He had retired at Santa Barbara. There was George Baldwin, who was a sociologist and a Native American. And Ruben Mendoza, who was an anthropologist and an archaeologist. He was doing work in San Juan Bautista, on the Mission. Anyway, and they were all hunched over and they didn't give me the time of day. I looked at them and I introduced myself. "Oh, hello, nice to meet you," and they went back to their work. And, I thought, "This does not feel like a good place for me!" I could understand being in Social Sciences because I was doing Oral History and a lot of my work at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies was more sociological. It was in Migration Studies and that sort of thing. It wasn't really directly in my field of literature. So I thought okay, well that's a possibility. And then when I started to meet other **[17:34]** faculty, I met Josina at this first meeting with the 35 people around the table. Josina Makau, who was a founding faculty member in the area of Communication Studies and Rhetoric and Ethics, and she's

just a very warm and inviting person. She was delighted. We struck up a conversation immediately and I said to her. . . . Oh, she was the person who was kind of in charge of the Arts as well as the Humanities, what was beginning to be the Humanities. So she was working with people whom I knew. Luis Valdez, who I didn't know personally but I knew who he was, a Chicano playwright, very famous playwright and filmmaker. And Judy Baca, a very well known Chicana artist. Suzanne Lacey, another visual artist whom I didn't know before. Oh, and Richard Bains who was also brought in with my group and he was going to be the Music Director. I didn't know him before but I knew *of* his wife, Amalia Mesa Bains, because we have a very good friend in common. So I thought, "Geez, you know, what am I doing here? I really would like to be with these people over here. It feels like this is where I belong." And at the time you could just declare **[19:15]** what you wanted to do! [Laughs] So I huddled with Josina and I said to her, "You know, Social and Behavioral Sciences is okay, but I don't really feel like that's a good place for me." And she said, "Well, come to us!" [Laughs] I said, "These are the courses I could teach." You know, I talked about Latina Life Stories because I had already taught that in New York the previous year. I had done a part time Lecturer gig with Women's Studies. So I had that course ready to go. I said I could teach Travel Narratives because I had taught that years ago at Stanford. There were more courses relating to literature. I have a Ph.D. in Romance Languages and Literatures with an emphasis on Spanish. I taught at Stanford in the Spanish Department for nine years and then I went to New York and changed my career completely and went into Oral History. So I couldn't really come back to, and I didn't apply to come back into teaching language, although I said I could teach it if they wanted me to, I could teach it with my eyes closed, hanging upside down, but my interests were more in interdisciplinary Humanities and in narrative and oral history. So Josina said, "Yes!" I would still teach Service Learning, because that's what they had hired me to teach "Intro to Service Learning," and I would teach some of these other courses. At the end of August we opened doors, and my first semester I taught a section of "Intro to Service Learning," and a course that was kind of a team taught course invented by the Provost. It had to do with the Fort Ord conversion. I had

already spoken to Suzanne Lacy about doing oral histories. She asked me if I would help them do oral histories of some of the base officials that were still around, and I said sure, because they wanted to do a murals project. So I had three classes the first semester, and one of them met on Saturday, the one with the Provost and I was stuck, I had to say "Yes, I'll be part of your team." I didn't do anything in that class – for that class. It was the strangest thing. I think it was really more of a bureaucratic assignment, on paper, you know. Then I taught Latina Life Stories. I don't know where I'm going with this, but this was part of me arriving in this place and figuring out where I fit.

[22:30] Adler: You mentioned 'opened doors', the day they opened doors. What was that like? The very first day on campus with the students?

Benmayor: You know, I don't remember the very first day. That's not vivid in my mind. I do remember my first meeting with the students in Latina Life Stories. There must have been about 14 women including some returning women, one in particular who used to be a fire fighter and Native American. There were a lot of Latinas and then there was one Anglo guy, and he was studying Liberal Studies. He wanted to be an elementary teacher. I remember that group going around the table and introducing ourselves. This was only the second time I had taught this course. So it was interesting because on the East Coast, I had Colombian, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Ecuadorian students. Here, I had Chicanos and Anglos. There were no African Americans in my class. There was this one woman who had Native heritage. So it was a very different demographic. And I'm trying to figure out, "Well, for the Latinas I don't have to explain this stuff, for the other people I do." [Chuckles] But I remember it was a very wonderful group and it was very exciting. The energy was high. I do remember that we got assigned to a vault to teach this class and there was no ventilation and there were 14 people. So I asked to switch with Richard Bains, who was teaching a music class outside my door, which meant we had to keep our door closed because otherwise we were hearing his class. I said, "Richard, why don't you come in the vault and I'll go outside?" It was a terrible situation. My Service Learning class, I remember the first day of that class. I don't know how many

people were in there, maybe 20? It was at a local elementary school because we didn't have classroom space yet for our classes. So it was in an elementary school and we got assigned to the kindergarten class. [Laughs] So the chairs were these little tiny chairs for kindergarten kids and that's what my students were sitting on! It was just the most bizarre thing imaginable! But it was fun because in some ways we were all kind of pioneers, although I hate the word, but, we were the first ones doing this. The students were very excited. They were apprehensive because they didn't know what they were getting into. We had students from all four years starting, you know, freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors, which normally doesn't **[26:20]** happen that way. So that was kind of crazy. But let me back up just a little. We had to have a Catalog. And a Schedule of Classes. So we all sort of wrote descriptions of the courses that we wanted to teach, you know? And that became part of the Catalog. The Catalog was published I think a week before classes started or something like that. I mean nobody knew what was going on. It was total chaos. But there we were, and they had taken the students off the weekend before classes started to Upward [Outward] Bound, because they didn't have the dorms ready. They took them to the beach and they had them doing all kinds of strange things that these Upward [Outward] Bound courses do, you know, like falling backwards and trusting each other and that kind of stuff. [Chuckles] So the students were kind of prepped for, "Okay! This is an adventure!" So that's the way it was, it was an adventure! Then we moved into Building 18. And I don't remember exactly when that happened but I had an office in the Service Learning unit next to Marian Penn, which was down in 86, in those bungalows. Then somewhere around the middle of the semester I think it was, Peter Smith, the President, did a shuffle. A reshuffle of administrative deans. He asked Josina Makau to become the Interim Dean for the Arts and Humanities. She was originally basically acting as the Chair for the Humanities. So then she became the Dean and so she looked at me and said, "Would you like to be the Chair?" [Laughs] And I said, "Sure," you know, because I'm an academic. You know that at some point or another you'll be called on to do something like that and it's part of the deal. So I said sure without knowing what I was getting into. She became the Dean and she also facilitated -- this is

sort of skipping ahead --, the creation of what I wanted to do, which was to have an Oral History Institute and Archive so that we would actually build oral history into the curriculum and have it be, from the get-go, an entity, because there was a lot of history here. VPA, Visual and Public Art, had asked for oral histories. There was the oral history of the founding of the university and all of this. I said, "We really need to do this – this is the way I would do it." So I got a budget. I got a budget at the beginning of $12,000 -- much to Luis Valdez's dismay because he claimed that I was taking money away from his budget --, to buy equipment, you know, tape recorders and some basic equipment and such. That's how it started. That was the first semester.

[29:38] Adler: I'd like to back up a little. You mentioned earlier about the sheets on the wall and sort of hieroglyphical language that you couldn't make any heads or tails of, but you mentioned the word concentric circle. I am interested to know, the founding faculty were brought here to build from a military base a university, and I am interested to know, what was the charge given to you as founding faculty to design how you were going to envision a new kind of university. Can you talk about that?

Benmayor: I wasn't in the very first group that was really the first Founding Faculty group. I was in the second. So my understanding of my charge was different in that my focus was going to be more on curriculum and designing curriculum and going through all the accreditation hoops that we had yet to go through, because we didn't get the traditional five years of planning before opening the doors. So we had to do everything simultaneously, which is part of why our workload was just so horrendous. You came the next year, and you were working your butt off as we all were, because we were not given the appropriate planning time. Fort Ord was a federal grant, I guess, to the university [the CSU]. The Senate, the Congress was ready to give the money that year and nobody wanted to wait five years and risk not getting the money. So that all went through in 1994. I wasn't around. The Founding Faculty had come…they were hired with tenure. They had come together I guess in January of 1995, and they had started planning. That's what I was seeing around the [room]. I wasn't part of that conversation so it's hard to piece together notes. I

didn't really understand what that was. I was looking to Josina for guidance as to what is my assignment. Because I got three classes from the get-go, my assignment was to teach. It was not administrative or planning in that regard. Once I was asked to be the Chair of HCOM [Human Communication major], then I also had planning tasks and administrative tasks, to build the budget, to … I don't know, hire some people. To hire a secretary. To make job announcements. All those sorts of things. To design an Operating Expenses budget. Somebody came and plopped down on my desk an Office Depot, or whatever it was called then, catalog. I said, "What do you want me to do? Count pencils?" [Chuckles] You know? They said, "Yeah, you have $25,000 to stock your department, basically. And so here's a catalog. Start ordering!" I was like, "This is totally nuts." It was totally nuts! My assignment in Service Learning, however, was a little more complicated because I was supposed to start making connections in the community and I didn't know this community from Adam, you know? There was, I don't know what his position was, he was maybe hired part time, a Chicano gentleman named Carlos, and I am not remembering his last name now. But he was assigned to take me around to meet people in the community. He took me to Salinas to some of the schools. These were for the placements for students in the community. I remember he took me out to Soledad, to a labor camp where families were living in these shacks, basically, in the shadow of the penitentiary there, Soledad Prison. So I met with people and he was basically showing me the landscape and what's going on here. So with that information, I was starting to line up assignments for students and figuring out how I was going to integrate that into my own class. That was a more complicated assignment that was going out into the community. And we really only did mostly Salinas at that time, yes, I think. I can't remember where we were.

[35:13] Adler: I was talking about building a new kind of university and were there moments that you remember or is there a moment that you remember where something that attracted you from the Vision Statement actually gave you the opportunity to put something very special into practice?

Benmayor: Well, I didn't come with the idea, like you did, of building a program. Yes, I wanted to build an Oral History program, yes. But these concentric circles were not on the walls. They were in kind of a manual that they gave us. They had done this with the recruitment, trying to explain this extraordinary structure. This was all very experimental but it had the blessing of the Central Office of the CSU. The President of the CSU wanted this. Or the Chancellor. It was all kind of like building a Santa Cruz for the CSU. It was part of a national conversation that was going on around interdisciplinarity and just shaking things up a little bit, right? It was confusing to everybody as to where we fit. But in that confusion I said, "Okay, well this is what I can contribute." So that was the beginning. I have to say that for me the Oral History program was important, but as soon as I got asked to be the Chair of HCOM my life changed. I didn't have the kind of focus that I might have had, had I not had the administrative duties for HCOM because that was a huge stress and a huge learning curve for me. Just learning what you do as a Chair. I didn't know. I'd never been one before. I'd been a Research Director, so I had some idea of some things but it was all very… very fluid. And people were configuring and reconfiguring. It was a lot of confusion. But at the same time, it was a space for creativity. In that way my classes were a space for me of creativity, because I realized very soon that I was not going to have the time to go out and do oral history projects. I wouldn't have any time to do that. So I said, "Okay, well I have to somehow or another build this into my teaching. So, I designed the Oral History and Community Memory class. The students would be doing the oral histories. We would be working on projects or individual projects. It started out first as individual projects but then I realized that that was untenable because I couldn't certainly give them background research support in 25 different topics. So I started to think about how to build new areas of research into the classes that I was teaching and use the classes as my sort of laboratories for writing about, you know, whatever. In some senses, I got moved from the area of Migration Studies, where I had been publishing about Puerto Ricans, and Women's Studies, into Pedagogy Studies, which was "I don't know what this is, but okay." So in that sense my creativity was embedded, my research was embedded with the classes. I

have to say that I did feel that the challenge of being asked to chair a department when there was nothing there, no structures at all, was a bit of a challenge to my creativity, too. I felt it as … an opportunity to grow, to learn something new. It was a challenge but it was a good challenge, I would say. I had plenty of times when I broke down crying, don't get me wrong! [Chuckles] I remember one time particularly, where Josina, our Dean then, was asking all the Chairs in her group to build these budgets. She's a numbers wiz. And I know nothing about numbers. So I couldn't make heads or tails out of this and I just broke down crying. I said, "This is so frustrating. I don't know what I'm doing! I don't know what you're asking me to do!" So on more than one occasion I had these breakdowns.

Adler: What did Josina do with that?

[40:40] Benmayor: Oh well, she was very kind and she walked me through the paces. I have to say, she was my mentor 24/7. We would have these phone conversations at six o'clock in the evening when everybody else had left. Right? Going over strategies for meetings coming up. A lot of strategy stuff happening. A lot of plotting. [Chuckles] Then asking about things that I was supposed to be doing and didn't understand. So it was like that. I never left that place until, I don't know, seven, eight o'clock at night? Yeah. And fortunately I lived two minutes away so I could get home fast and collapse. I had no furniture, mind you, except a bed. [Laughs]

Adler: So let me back up and ask you about that class where you so wisely said, "Well, if I don't have time to do the research in oral history, I'll build it into my class" After you decided not to do many different subjects, but one, what subject matter did you choose? Or what is the … most dear one that comes to mind of the classes that you taught, the oral history class?

Benmayor: Well, it wasn't at the beginning. I think at the beginning we did have the Fort Ord Conversion Project. So some students were interviewing military people that were still around. Some were interviewing veterans of Fort Ord that they knew through their families or whatever. We did a few interviews with some of the founding administrators on the campus. So that was kind of like the first

project. That was done also in collaboration. I did a workshop for VPA students about interviewing military people because they were going to be painting portraits to put on windows, on the barracks. So they also went out and did oral histories. I think the next really focused project was … hmm, I'm not remembering right now. I know I wanted to begin to capture some of the ethnic history of the region so I think for a time I had some students doing that. But it took me a while, several years, to really land on a focused project. And the first one I think was in 1999 [1998]. It was First Generation College Students. That was actually suggested to me by one of the Service Learning colleagues. Oh, gosh. Now I'm not going to remember her name. It will come to me. Michelle Slade. She was the one who mentioned that. That was the first project where everybody in the class worked on the same thing. They read the same research. I had put the research together. They were kind of brought up to speed. But the beautiful thing about that class, and I taught that same topic for at least two years, maybe three, I don't remember, was that the majority of the students in the class were first generation to college! So they actually were the experts in the topic! I was giving them the **[44:35]** tools to go out and document that experience. They went to their peers on the campus. I had one semester in which we assigned some students to high school students in Seaside, asking them about what they wanted to do to go to college, etc. So, that project became really lovely and we made two websites out of that work. The students really did a great job and I have about 100 interviews on first generation college students. As part of the Oral History Archive, especially if it's a community project, you want to give back to the community something. You don't want to just take away the stories but you want to have the community share in those stories. So this was First Generation to College. So, I said, "Why don't we try to do a special issue of the student newspaper, *The Otter Realm*, and have a special feature on this work?" So we did. We got -- I don't know who was in charge at that time – to do a special insert. It was like a four-page thing, in which we put together as a class an essay including excerpts from the oral histories to illustrate the points, the conclusions that we were coming to after doing these interviews. So that was really nice. And then I had somebody make a web page out of it so we put that up. Then the second time I

taught that class we had a Forum. We held a Forum at the University and invited all the administrators and faculty and students. We had the students in the class planning a panel and giving short papers about their experiences and what they had found. Their findings. Then we made a website out of that, too. So that was a very concrete – you know, it was a Service Learning class and it was giving a service to the University. That was the other thing. I had made Oral History into Service Learning because it was a natural. Although it was very different pedagogy from your typical Service Learning pedagogy. The other project that stands out was one that we started in 2008.

[47:20] Adler: Before you go on to that could you talk, please about a few of the conclusions that the class came to?

Benmayor: Oh, gosh. Well, I'm not sure I'm going to remember them. The issues that students had, one of them for example, was convincing their parents that they should live on campus, not live at home. The one thing that we did find was that parents were really, really supportive of their children going on in higher education. They wanted their children to go to college. They just didn't have a concept of what that was. They knew that education was the only way their kids would move up, at any rate, out of the fields. Not everybody's parents were farmworkers but…. So it's not that there wasn't parental support for it but it was understanding what the University needs to do to communicate culturally with parents. How to do that. That was one of the recommendations, is to have Parents Day and have the parents come to the campus and see classes. This is a side story, but I remember one of the students wanted very much to go to Junior Year Abroad in Spain. Her parents were farmworkers, right? And it was like, "A girl, going off? Our daughter going off by herself?" She had to convince her mother. Of course, this was Lupe Figueroa, and she was a very, very enterprising young woman. [Laughs] She was very shy but she was very enterprising. So she actually brought her mother to campus and had her mother come to classes and meet her teachers and see what we were doing. And brought her younger sister. Eventually she did go to Junior Year Abroad and her mother went to visit her in Granada. [Chuckles] But it was understanding the culture without

stereotyping it. Understanding what from within the culture is important and then how to negotiate those fears that parents had, because it was fears. So a lot of what we focused on was what students were saying about the difficulties they were having in terms of working with their parents, etc. But also the difficulties they were having with the campus, the campus community. Because they were seen as . . . as one student put it, "I've never seen such a diverse place in my life as the campus." And our campus was not diverse in the early years, as you remember. There were a lot of Latino students but you didn't see them because they were all commuting. You didn't see students on the campus at all. There were so few of them, you know? [Chuckles] Everybody was either in classes or in their cars. There was no Student Center where they could hang out. That's changed, fortunately. But the racism on campus: It was very important to understand how these students felt on the campus. If they felt like this is the most diverse place. . . "I'm out of my element. I come from East Salinas where everybody is like me. And I come here and I don't know how to be here." You know? Getting students to talk about that in the oral history interviewing, having students share those experiences, was very important, I think. At least being able to analyze and to state to the campus that this doesn't happen automatically. You have to really look at these issues [of race] in the classroom, for example. A student being called by the teacher and feeling like you are being singled out when the teacher's intention was not to do that. But you know, it's like really negotiating those details. Another area that was important in those interviews was the experience of migrant students. Students who with their parents were moving from one area to another kind of thing. So yeah, those were some of the main issues.

[52:08] Adler: Was there an opportunity for you and your students to transmit these findings to the administration so that they could be applied?

Benmayor: Yah. In the second year, we had the newspaper article the first time so everybody could read that. The second time we had this Forum and we invited the administrators. Some of them came, not all, but some came. It was held in the University Center. By that time we already had that chimney, the

copper chimney there. That was probably around 2001, something like that, that we held that Forum there. It was well attended. A lot of people came. Yeah.

Adler: That's great. That's just great.

Benmayor: Yeah. What they did with it was, who knows? Because there was no follow through on it. But it's still up on a website, 'these are our recommendations.' [Laughs]

Adler: That's a wealth of information that you found out.

Benmayor: And I was able to publish a couple of articles in journals. One was the *Social Justice* journal. No, I take that back. I didn't use the first generation material for that. I published it somewhere else. I don't remember right now.

Adler: Do you want to take a break?

Benmayor: No, I'm okay.

Adler: You were about to talk about another theme and I interrupted you, about another theme for one of the classes, the oral history classes.

[53:45] Benmayor: Oh. Chinatown. Salinas Chinatown. That happened in 2008 and this was an initiative that came to me through Seth Pollack, who was the Director of the Service Learning Institute. And he had been for many years working down in Chinatown with Service Learning students who were working with the homeless at Dorothy's Kitchen, at the Victory Mission, at the Community Garden, etc. on Soledad Street, which is the old Chinatown in Salinas. He had been approached by some of the Chinese elders asking if his students could help them gather the history of their community because they were getting older. Now, in Chinatown there are three historic communities there: Chinese, Japanese and Filipino. Each of them has a community center in Chinatown, so they have a presence there still. So it was elders from the Confucius Church, from the Chinese Cultural Center down there that came to us. So Seth asked me if I would be interested. I met with Mr. Ahtye, Wallace Ahtye, and got a sense of what he was interested in and asked him, I said, "Well, I can integrate it into a class and have my whole class out there doing oral

histories. You will have to provide the names of people and you will have to make the initial contacts with people so that they know who we are when we contact them." And of course we don't want to contact somebody who is not interested in doing it. So that project ended up being a seven-year project.

Adler: Wow.

Benmayor: The first year we interviewed Chinese. The second year, Japanese. Third year, Filipino. Fourth year, Latinos. Fifth year we went back to – well, maybe it was a six-year project. We went to a kind of smattering of people that we hadn't captured the first times around. And including some homeless people on Soledad Street. And the last year was with service providers down there. So we have a huge body of interviews. Oh, about close to 200 interviews from all these communities and various different products have come out of that process. Including every year that we did that, we would have a community celebration at the end and we would put together clips. And these were on videotape now. So we put together video clips. Students would select what they thought was the 'most interesting two minutes of their interview' kind of thing, and we would just put them together and have an hour show and invite the narrators. And have it in one of the community centers. And they were always hugely attended and very, very successful. And so it was a really wonderful experience for the students to see how much … I would always say to them, "You won't understand the importance of what you're doing until the very last day of class, and that's just the way it is with this work. You will not understand it." The last day of class is when we have the community celebration and that's when the narrators would come and stand up at the mike and thank the students for what they had done and talk about the importance of it. They were telling, not me. And that was the "aha" moment for that class every year. So it's been very, very rewarding in that way. And I loved teaching that class but the housekeeping of organizing, making sure that the videographers and that the students know where they are supposed to be at the right time and have they done their pre-interviews, it's just a huge amount of work. It was time to let it go, yeah, when I retired in December. It

doesn't mean I might not come back to teach it again but I just needed to be away from that kind of schedule for a long time. [Chuckles]

Adler: Is it out there in the community? Is there a website?

Benmayor: The Chinatown material does have a website. We built a website and are starting to build an oral history walking tour of the community where you can be at home and on the computer, walk through Chinatown and hear excerpts of oral histories that pop up you know, you click on number one and that's the Republic Café. And you have all these people talking about the Republic Café. It's a little clunky because you have to do a lot of clicking and all that but it's also an archival site because I have the full oral histories up there. And there's an explanatory background and etc. So that's a proper website. It also has historic newspapers and other kinds of archival materials linked there.

[59:10] Last fall in 2014 we went over to Seaside and we, because the Seaside community was saying that they wanted to have this work done because it's an African American community that is basically being taken … I mean its people are moving away, the kids are moving away, it's no longer majority African Americans. It's majority Latino now. And so the African American community wanted to have something. So I went to the Village Project, which is run by Mel Mason and his wife, Regina Mason, who is a social worker, and Mel is a therapist who was a therapist at CSUMB for many years. So they devised a list of names and they got somebody to do the initial contacts with people and we had the training for the students at the Peace and Justice Center in Seaside. And Steven Goings was very helpful in lining up a series of speakers to come in and I also had some contacts. So the students went through a kind of, every Friday we would go down there for history training in the month of September. And then in October they did their interviews. Excerpts from those interviews, not the entire interviews but excerpts are up online on YouTube. And so they have been – I haven't looked to see how many people have accessed them - but they're up there. So. Yeah.

[1:00:55] Adler: What's your vision for Oral History continuing?

Benmayor: Oh, gosh. You know, I really…it was very difficult. And I very much wanted to be able to do like what you did in terms of having two faculty there to anchor the program and to continue it, your Creative Writing and Social Action Program. A number of things have worked against this. One is that we no longer have our lines to replace. So it's no longer our decision as to whether we're going to get a replacement or not. And then there's a lot competing needs within the Humanities and Communication area for faculty in other areas, and Oral History is not a priority because it wasn't a huge numbers gatherer. And my initial appointment on my appointment letter was as a multidisciplinary faculty member. [Laughs] What the hell is that? You know?! And that's the way it was. So it's like, "Oh, well, she doesn't have a specific charge in Oral History" so the university can very easily say we don't really need that. You know. We need other things more. So right now the class is going on and it's a full class. It is being taught by one of our ex-students who went to Columbia University and got a Master's in Oral History and it's the only post graduate program in the country in Oral History. Kristen La Follette. And so she is a trained oral historian. She's got the best training. And she is teaching the class this semester. And so my hope is that she will be able to continue it every year but, you know, I don't have control over it. My vision would be that we would be able to get a faculty person, a tenure track faculty person who would be an oral historian. Now we did put in a job request that went to the dean last semester for a historian and an oral historian, somebody to do American History and Oral History. So Oral History is not just a – well, it's a desirable – it's part of the job description. But that hasn't been approved and it's sitting in the Dean's office and I don't know whether the provost will approve such a hire. There's a dearth of historians. There's only like two historians on the whole campus. And one of them is acting as a Chair and the other one has other issues. And so we need historians. We can't have a campus without History. But the move nowadays is going towards disciplines because that's the way people are going to get, you know, funded. And that's where student recognition, they go to what they recognize. And that's where I think we have lost ground as a university. Our founding ideals about that. We were, and you spoke about this in your interview, we were imagining that we are

creating something new and that we, in fact, are leaders and that students will benefit from this new thinking and new planning and new everything. And that came up, as you said, crashed against the idea of the students as consumers. The parents as consumers. You know, they're paying money for what? You know. And so there's this total disconnect between innovation in higher education, innovation in teaching, innovation in career building, and these more traditional boxes that everybody recognizes and that you will get students to sign up for your major because it's something they recognize and then you'll get the money for it. So it's just very sad.

[1:05:30] Adler: It's very sad because what you've done is a very…treasured 21st century skill. I think of Spielberg and his Institute and doing Oral History of Holocaust survivors.

Benmayor: But it doesn't fit – there's no History major. So when you think about the campus what happens is that this work has to be located somewhere in the larger scheme of what the university offers. And a lot of what we do is interdisciplinary. A lot of what we do is marginal in some ways. And creative. I don't mean marginal in a bad way but sort of outside the box kind of thing. And there are very few programs in the country that teach oral history at the undergraduate level. Most of them are graduate programs connected to History departments, of course. Right?

Adler: Right.

Benmayor: But oral history is a very multidisciplinary field and there are people from all different backgrounds in it. Mine came from literature. What I focus on is how to interpret the narratives that we get. So what's the narrative, how do you understand what this person is saying? You have to look at the text of what they are saying and listen to it and listen to the inflections and understand, you know, put it in context kind of thing. So that's where my literary training comes in. And that's how I organize the class. But a historian would do it very differently. You know. I don't know, I just hope that oral history, that there's enough resonance of the things that we have done and the projects that we have done over the years that the university will say "Okay, we really do need to have somebody who teaches this." So.

Adler: I think I need a break.

Benmayor: Okay.

[1:07:25]Adler: Rina, we were talking about your classes, your vision for oral history, your creativity at the university. Are there other thoughts that you have about that that you wanted to talk about?

Benmayor: Um, yeah. I think I'd like to talk a little bit about my experience with my Latina Life Stories class because that also has become a class where it was kind of like a signature class for me and very much of a "heart" class. In, as I said before, I had begun teaching this in New York and brought it to California and basically changed some of the texts that we read to make it more relevant to the Chicano demographic here. But the critical part of that class is that as we read these autobiographical narratives by Latinas, I asked students to think about writing their own. Their own stories. And so I do some writing exercises in the class and such. In New York students wrote autobiographies, basically, around whatever topics they wanted within the topic range of the class. When I came to CSUMB I did the same thing. And then at the end of the semester students would read from their own autobiographies to have a kind of celebration of what we had done because that class is a very unique class in the sense that it creates a… it's kind of an automatic creation of a safe space in the classroom, very similar to what you were talking about with your Creative Writing and Social Action classes. When students decide to disclose and bare their personal stories, whether they are traumatic stories or not, they're personal stories; what I saw happening in the classroom was that students would become very open to the stories that they were hearing and very respectful of each other because people were speaking from their own experience rather than in a sort of theoretical or abstract way. And so arguments around issues didn't really come up very much in that class. It was a lot of listening and respectful listening and a lot of solidarity in the classroom as students would urge each other to take the step to disclose and to share personal information. So that's always been in that class from the … it's structured into its DNA.

Around about 1996 or 97, Troy Challenger introduced me to a colleague in Computer Science. A faculty member, it wasn't his colleague. It was a faculty member in computer science who then sent me an email showing me samples of digital stories that the Digital Story Center in Berkeley which had recently formed and was starting to record, video record these oral … these digital stories that people had. And I thought, "Oh, that's perfect for my class!" So in 2000 we. . . actually Lev Gonick who was then the CEO or the head of IT on the campus gave us some money to bring down some trainers from the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley to train some of our faculty and staff in a workshop so that we could understand how to do these digital stories. I remember that you were in that workshop and we were paired up with somebody else who, in my case it was with Pat Watson and he did the technology stuff and I was like the director, the film director kind of thing. [Chuckles] But it was about my own story. So we each wrote our own stories and then we illustrated them and we narrated them and we produced them into these digital stories. So we learned how to do it. And that's what I began. From 2000 on, my Latina Life Stories class was digital storytelling so every student would learn how to make a digital story and then at the end of the semester show their own digital story. They were three-minute movies, basically. They were short. But you can get a lot in three minutes. You can put a lot in there. And so this was kind of a wonderful experience for me and I believe it was also wonderful for most of the students to actually produce something that they could take home, you know? And say, "This is my story." Many students would make copies and give them to their families as Christmas gifts or whatever. So there was a sense of ownership and pride in this class, of being able to come out of the class producing something. I always said that students became authors in their own right just like the authors that they were reading. They were reading Sandra Cisneros and Judith Ortiz Cofer and a lot of Latinas who had finally broken into the publishing world and had many autobiographical narratives and stories out there.

[1:13:37] So over the years, I don't know, maybe I have 500, 600 of these stories, from every semester. And I do have a website that is in bad need of updating but where I have a lot of the stories there. They're

not all accessible to people outside of CSUMB so I have to think now about making a website and putting them on YouTube so that they are accessible. And I of course get permission from the students as to how they want their stories to be disseminated or not. So I have those guidelines. But they have been fantastic. At first, Troy Challenger taught the lab to teach them how to make these. The learning curve was very steep for the students in the early years because they weren't so at home with technology yet. Now, we do have a lab but a lot of the students know how to make these stories already so the learning curve is not steep at all. What I've found is that my work with the students was more around script writing and the dramatic reading of the scripts. I would help them edit their stories down, you know, distill them, make sure they had a punchline or some message they were trying to convey. Also get them into the recording booth and to have them *tell* their story, rather than read it. And so there was all this work with dramatic delivery and the voice and the pitch and the . . ., how high you want your voice to start, etc. So that was all great fun. I really loved doing that kind of work. To me that was immensely creative and wonderful to watch the students be creative and to see what they came out with at the end. And at the end of the semester we would always have a festival and show everybody's stories. And they would invite family and friends and have food and this and that and the other. So I guess my classes all have festivals at the end. [Laughs] So that's another aspect of the creativity that I think has been important for me.

Adler: Is there anything that you wished you could have done that you were stopped from doing?

[1:16:15] Benmayor: Yeah. I think I wished I could have developed more of the Oral History Institute. At some point we were told Institute is not an appropriate title for these things. So I was told drop the Institute and just make it an Archive. Then there was no Special Collections yet in our University Library, so these things are just sitting in my office, I mean in digital form, in cassette form and so there's no budget for really making this work accessible. You know. And so that's the bad side of it, was having the budget disappear. Other things that I wished I could have done? I don't know. I think I was fairly okay with what

I had been doing in terms of teaching. Nothing pops into mind except for really being able to have some money to develop the oral history work. Yeah.

Adler: Okay. You came to the university in response to a certain vision and a certain point there was a shift. Do you remember a moment in particular when that happened and what your response was?

Benmayor: Hmm. I know we've all looked at these questions but they're hard questions when they're asked to you. [Laughs] A particular moment when the Vision shifted. I don't know. I want to say that I've always seen the Vision as a contentious space because when I first came to the university and met the administrators we had a President who had nothing to do with the area that we're in or the culture, the communities that the university was in, and that, to me, seemed to be kind of out sync with the Vision, the Vision Statement. There were faculty in the early years that subscribed to some aspects of the Vision but not what I call the multicultural core of the Vision. So I think there were diverging interpretations of that Vision from the get-go. And as the university has developed, I mean, departments have – we were what used to be called Institutes, now we're Departments or Divisions or Schools or whatever – really are going in their own direction. And I'm not sure I can pinpoint when that started to happen but it's happened. And when faculty come in now, I don't know whether in their interviews they are even asked about the Vision anymore. I don't know. I am sure that some students – some faculty are attracted by it but I'm not sure it's a core anymore of recruitment and such. In some ways, for example, our student body has become much more diverse in recent years. We have many more African American students on campus. Many more Latino students. Many Asian students, well not a lot but some Asian students. And as I walk around the campus and even in the composition of my classes I can see a lot of diversity which didn't happen, wasn't happening let's say around 2002 to 2010 maybe, something like that. We were getting more white students coming from the recruitment areas. And now that's changed and that's all for the good because, and you see many more students on campus, and we have a beautiful Library and the students congregate in the library. So you begin to actually see the demographic of the student body much more visually than you

would before. I think that there is more of a focus now on coming back to the whole issue of how does the community relate to the university, how does the university relate to the community which was kind of absent for quite a while. But, I would say another diverging moment was when -- and I believe that was when Dianne Harrison came in as President --, was this push to develop disciplinary majors on the campus rather than interdisciplinary majors. That has caused a great deal of shift on the campus. A great deal. We have Biology, Psychology, Kinesiology, Marine Science. We are beginning to have all of these recognizable majors that used to be interdisciplinary like Earth Systems Science and Health Sciences and things like that. And now there is a push to develop – to have a History major and an English major and all of that sort of thing, which completely destroys the interdisciplinarity, at a time when the Harvards and the Yales are moving toward interdisciplinarity! You know, have been for several years now pushing that. And so it's like we are completely out of sync with … and it's all because of this need to get dollars. You know? And get students who think that they are going to get a career out of a major. And that's the biggest mistake that there is because an undergraduate major doesn't get you much unless you are in computer science maybe. [Chuckles] You know. So there is that siloeing now back towards traditional disciplines and I think that's destroying a major piece of the Vision and what we came together to do in a creative way.

[1:22:55] Adler: That's so ironic that Harvard and Yale are moving in that direction and we were doing that 20 years ago.

Benmayor: And ironic that we are getting more minority, quote-unquote "minority" students into the university and shifting… shifting the curriculum back to traditional formats. It's like irony of ironies. Yeah, so that's a bit disappointing. But I'm no longer on. . . I haven't been for five years, on university committees, so I don't really have a sense, a pulse of what goes on and where things are. I can only see it now from my vantage point in teaching and then now as a kind of, you know, voyeure. Voyeuse. [Laughs]

Adler: Is there something that you learned from coming to CSUMB that you think you might now know now if you hadn't come?

Benmayor: That's a good question. I learned that in order to create a really productive and congenial collaborative environment that you have to pay very special attention to whom you hire. And to make sure that that person, regardless of what their brilliant assets may be, that they are compatible. And so I learned that the culture of the workplace is something that doesn't happen automatically. You very much have to pay attention to who you bring in and whether there's a rapport there. I have to say that we've been very lucky in HCOM [Human Communication] to have by and large, I mean there have been some people who have left and whatever, we've had our ups and downs, too, but by and large there is still a feeling in HCOM of a collective environment in that the faculty makes collective decisions. Really learning how to do that I think is something I didn't know before. I was a Research Director before and I had two or three people that I worked with as a team but I didn't have really developed leadership skills. And so I think that this university has in fact taught me some leadership skills. To have a department where you really enjoy working with the people that you're working with, and yes, we had differences and disagreements and disappointments, but I think by and large we made a lot of friends in that department. So they were not only colleagues but friends. So that, I think, is something that I learned. I learned a lot about interdisciplinarity, and I've learned a lot about having space to be creative. Even within budget constraints. You know, figuring out, "Okay, where is my passion in this?" Like with digital storytelling. That was so sustaining and so satisfying. And it didn't take a whole lot to do it. You know. Basically I could have gone to Berkeley and gotten trained [in the technology] by myself. It does take resources in the sense that we have to have the department agree to have somebody teach a lab [Chuckles] and the money for that and that sort of thing. I think I've learned that … how wonderful it is to be able to start from scratch and not walk into something that's already preordained. And I don't know what the new HCOM faculty feel, because there is that weight of we were here first and "we did it this way" and all that kind of thing. So I don't know how they experience it. But for me it was so liberating to be able to dream and make the dream into a reality and do it with others and … and teach what you wanted to teach, not what you were prescribed to

teach. And building a curriculum around what people felt was valuable and important in the world. And working with like-minded people. So I think that's been really very special. I wouldn't have had that other places. No.

[1:28:18] I was thinking about some stories I wanted to share that didn't really fit into the questions but I was resonating with this story. I remember we were in Building 18, where HCOM had its offices. And a student came to talk to me about taking the Oral History class. And this was like 1996, the spring of 1996, the first year I was teaching there basically. She explained that she was a police officer on the campus. And that because she was on duty or on call or whatever that she would have to come to class in her uniform. This was for Oral History class. I said, "Oh, really!" I said, "Does that mean that you would be carrying your weapon?" And she said, "Yes." And I said, "Well, I can't have a gun in the classroom. It. . . silences me and I don't know who the students are in the class and what experience they might have had with police. This is a class where we are sharing stories and we are collecting other people's stories and such and there is a fair amount of disclosure and respect and safe space that needs to be created." And she said she understood perfectly and she would get another class. She was taking classes in Liberal Studies and wanted to be a teacher. Well, about less than an hour later I get a call from our Dean, Josina, saying that she had gotten call from the Vice President saying that *he* had gotten a call from the police chief and that that was about what I had said and that she couldn't take the class. I said, "Well, let me explain to you what I said to her and what she decided." So it created a big uproar and it went to the President. I really didn't know what to do because, hah!, I am a product of Berkeley in the sixties, excuse me. To have a policeman in uniform with a gun in the classroom is to me like unbelievable that they would even request such a thing or expect it to happen. To me that symbolized that I was in this military space, you know, and that this university was still very militarized. What does the police chief have to say about who I let into my class or not? Well, they actually, the President looked at the … the what is it, the state title, whatever it is.

Adler: The protocol?

Benmayor: Equal Opportunity, you know, whatever. And in that legislation it says that you cannot prohibit somebody from being in a public classroom based on how they are dressed. Which was, I think a statement that happened in the sixties where people were wearing dashikis and afros and all sorts of things. I don't know how this developed. But anyway. So on that score I could not deny her being in the class. But there's nothing in the legislation that says anything about a weapon. In the other CSU's, police officers go to class but they go in civilian clothes. So they're not identified as anything. You know. So based on the fact that there was going to be a weapon in the class and there was nothing … there was like, then I said, "Well, I'm not going to admit it. You can fire me if you want but I'm not going to have it." Because she didn't press the issue it never happened, it was never challenged. But it was a very sobering experience for me, and a fearful one. I said, "Here I am, busting my gut to help create this department that doesn't exist. It had no secretary. It had no paper. It had no pencils. It had no nothing! And they are coming to me and saying that I must admit a police with a gun in the classroom!" And I said, "This is totally crazy. I am out of my element." It was a scary moment. I mean it got resolved by inertia because it wasn't pressed. But it was a troubling moment. Yeah, in the first years.

Adler: Were there other troubling moments?

[1:33:27] Benmayor: Not in a political way. Well, there were, yes, later on with the dismissal or the "reassignment" of Cecilia Burciaga, who was the Special Advisor to the President, to President Peter Smith at that time. And Cecilia came with that experience from Stanford University where she had similar positions in the administration and all of a sudden she gets – he decides that he doesn't want her anymore as his Chief of Staff and he gives her a sort of token position as Interim or Assistant Dean of Student Affairs or something like that.

Adler: Do you know why he didn't want her anymore as his Chief of Staff?

Benmayor: I think she was politically very strong and he wasn't from here and he couldn't – you know, I think it was a personal thing. He just didn't like having her around. She was not an easy person to… she didn't give in easily and she was very adamant about things.

Adler: What things was she particularly connected to?

Benmayor: I don't know. I can't speak for that. But she was always … she had a pulse on the community which he did not. He had the Pebble Beach community but he didn't have a pulse on any of the other communities. And so that caused a great deal of upheaval on the campus. Students protested and there were walkouts. And there was a demand for her reinstatement. And there was a demand for the resignation of the Provost. I don't remember exactly the blow-by-blow developments of this but that was a very tense moment on the campus. Yeah. She was a nationally recognized Chicana administrator. You don't do that to somebody. It was sort of the same way that he deposed Steve Arvizu from being the Provost. One fine day two months into the semester we were told that Steve Arvizu was no longer going to be the Provost and that he was being given some other ceremonial position and taken out of the picture. So it was that kind of modus operandi that was very unacceptable. And regardless of the merits of Steve Arvizu or Cecilia Burciaga, the way in which it was done and the arrogance in which it was done was not acceptable and certainly not part of our Vision. So that was a very tense moment because students and faculty were sort of taking positions on this. There were some who were not going to say anything and others who were more vocal about it. So it developed, we had developed a whole … Chicano/Latino Faculty and Staff Association, CLFSA. And a lot of the faculty and students and staff came together around this to talk about political strategy and how to resist this decision and it was tense. It was a tense moment. I don't think I want to say much more about that because I think I need to think more about what exactly happened and I'm not sure I have the sequence of events very clear in my head. But I still have a folder in my file cabinet that says CLFSA and all that material is still there. [Chuckles]

Adler: Another oral history project.

Benmayor: Yeah. Yes. But yeah. And I think I've also, and maybe this is not the opportunity to do it, maybe we can talk about this tomorrow, is talk about the development of HCOM. My experience as being the chair for five years at the beginning and what went into that. So that was also, it wasn't a tense moment but it was *stressful*! Oh yeah, very stressful.

[1:38:15] Adler: We'll talk about that tomorrow.

[Recording resumes the following day, August 25, 2015].

[1:38:18] Adler: We are here on the second part of an oral history interview with Rina Benmayor on Tuesday, August the 25th. So, Rina, we were talking yesterday about your experience at CSUMB and I was wondering, I came a year after you did, and I was wondering what happened that first year.

Benmayor: [Laughs]

Adler: [Laughs] Can you tell us in 25 words or less? No, no, no! What are some of the moments that pop up for you?

Benmayor: Some of them I already talked about, like for example a lot of us shifted from one assignment to another. I wasn't the only one that moved into HCOM. Tomás Kalmar also, who had been assigned to Math and Teacher Ed, shifted over to Humanities. So we were … let's see. We were Qun Wong, who was teaching literature, Tomas Kalmar was teaching … what was he teaching? I don't remember exactly. He did teach some Math. Philosophy I think he was teaching.

Adler: I think he was teaching philosophy in our department and in the Mathematics area.

Benmayor: And then Alberto Ledesma,, who had been there from the first year but as a Lecturer was teaching Chicano studies and literature. And I was teaching oral history and Latina Life Stories and life story sriting kind of thing. And then we were all teaching Capstones and Pro-Seminars which were totally new classes for us. None of us had ever done these kinds of classes before. They were challenging because

one was an introduction to the major that wasn't really set yet. [Chuckles] And the capstone was, I guess at the end of the first year we had capstones because we had some seniors, a few, so they did various projects and got mentors and that kind of thing. But really, we were a very small group of faculty and we had no office space. Well, we were finally given office space in Building 18. We had four offices. And our quote-unquote "secretary" sat out in the middle of this big room with a bunch of other secretaries. It was very interesting. So some of the things that I remember that happened was that first of all, we didn't have a major set out. We had courses the first year but we didn't have a major. And so we had to work that year to design the full major and get it accredited by CPEC, which is the California – I can't remember what it stands for [California Postsecondary Education Commission] – but it's the accrediting body of the state, not just the CSU but the state, for Higher Education. So we were crazy writing these documents without any idea. No experience of having done them before. No idea of what they were good for, etc. And then we also started to design some lines, you know, to bring more faculty in. Because Cecilia O'Leary had been hired as a historian but she took the first year of fellowship. She was in Washington, D.C. So she took the first year as a year of leave. And so she didn't come until the second year either. At that point we had to design these documents and sort of figure out a major but my memory is fuzzy here as to whether we actually had MLO's [Major Learning Outcomes] at that point. I'm not sure if that started before you came or happened when you came. I have a feeling that the MLO's and all that happened in Year Two because I remember Cecilia being involved in designing MLO 2. Anyway.

[1:43:00] Adler: And I was involved in designing MLO 8.

Benmayor: Yeah. Yes. So we had some general projections but maybe we didn't have details yet. And I had to hire a secretary. And that was my first hiring fiasco because we hired somebody who turned out to – [Chuckles] - who was really a journalist at heart and had no desire to be a secretary and she would sit out in the middle of that area and talk to her friends on the phone. And the other secretaries would

complain. So we had to ask her to leave. And I'm not sure if it was in the first year that Jane [Ragusa] appeared. Do you remember?

Adler: Oh, Jane!

Benmayor: Yeah. We had no secretary because Jasmine had left. She actually resigned. She'd left. And so there we were with all this paper piling, all this mail piling up on the desk, you know. And I certainly didn't have time to go through mail. So we got a temp. We got a thing from the temp agency. And they sent us a woman who was a military spouse but who had been an elementary school teacher. Anyway, she walked in and I said, "Welcome! There's the desk, there's the mail and I have no idea what to do here!" [Chuckles] And she sat down, she started going through the mail and then she came up to me about an hour later and she said, "I'm looking through these requisition forms," the RAT forms – I don't remember what RAT stands for, but anyway … it's for travel. Yeah. And she says, "I see you went to a conference and what you are asking for is a reimbursement." She said, "Do you know that you are entitled to more than what is on this form?" And I looked at her and I said, "What?" I said, "How do you know?" And she said, "Well, I looked in the manual that was over there and I figured out that you actually can claim more per diem or something like that. I don't know what it was. You're entitled to X number of dollars per diem and I hadn't claimed it. You know. And I looked at her with my mouth open and I said, "Jane, would you like a full time job?" [Laughs] And she looked at me and she said "Yes!" And that's how we got Jane Ragusa as our first real secretary / office administrator / office assistant.

Adler: She was terrific.

Benmayor: And she was terrific. She was just the sunniest, the brightest, the nicest, the most efficient, totally, totally responsible. It was like [sound of relief]. And when she actually had to leave because her husband got reassigned somewhere else in the country it was a sad day. But I have other stories about secretaries or administrative assistants. So we had an opening and we were looking and somebody who was working as a temp on the campus had applied. And so I said well, "Come, let's meet.

You know, come to my office." And that was Yolanda. Yolanda Pérez. And she had been working I think as a temp or part time in University Advancement. She was looking to move up. So she came and I remember very distinctly, she was standing outside of the secretarial area like where the water cooler is, and I walked down the hall and I saw her and she saw me and I extended my hand. I said "Hi, I'm Rina." She said, "I'm Yolanda." And I said, "Come back to my office." And within two minutes I knew that she was the right person. It's just … it's an aura, you know, that people exude. I had that same feeling with Maria Villaseñor, whom we hired for Chicano Studies. You know, within two minutes you know that that person is the right person. I mean you can make mistakes, yes, but there's something that's immediate. And so. But anyway, other things that happened in that first year was of course we interviewed – hired you. We interviewed you. We also interviewed for another position, I think it was a Lecturer in Communication Studies. For Debian. I'm not sure Debian Marty came as a Lecturer or tenure track.

Adler: She came the same time I did as a tenure track.

Benmayor: So then we also had a search for her position that year. And then there was somebody named Suzanne LaGrande.

Adler: I remember her.

[1:48:00] Benmayor: And she was a Lecturer. She didn't stay that long. But we hired her or we searched for that position in the first year. So we had a number of searches. So that took a lot of time because we were only four people. [Chuckles] You know. Then in the first year also we started to begin to separate out from those crazy concentric circles in which everybody was overlapping and I said, "Well, that's good and I love that but we also have certain things that we have to take care of here. We have a major, right?" And so the major itself became kind of like the anchor for how things began to development as … well, we were called Institutes at that point. We weren't called departments. We actually are not called a department now either. So we're a Division of Humanities and Communication. But the real roller coaster ride was trying to set up the administrative part of the unit. You have to have all these forms. And you have to have a filing

system. You have to have supplies. You have to have ways of tracking activity. And budget. The budget work was really something. And so creating a baseline budget. That fell to me. And that was crazy for me. It was crazy making because I didn't really have an idea what's an operating expense and what's a – you know, to me a budget is a budget, right? [Laughs] So, and learning all of that, as to what had to be charged here, what had to be charged there. And then we had a lot of these … Josina, in the second semester of the first year, Josina Makau became the Interim Dean. And so she began having college meetings. I'm not sure what … Center meetings. We called them Centers. And that would have involved Teledramatic Arts and Technology with Luis Valdez. And Visual and Public Art with Judy Baca and Suzanne Lacy. And Stephanie Johnson I think had been brought on by that time as a Lecturer. And there was Johanna Poethig, was there as a Lecturer, too I think from the very first year. And Richard Bains from Music and Performing Arts. And what else. I can't remember what else was in our college [center].

Adler: The Sciences. Not science, Social Scientists.

Benmayor: No, they were separate. They were separate, they were another unit. And which we were – [Laughs] – we were very happy with that because there wasn't a good gestalt between the faculty in those two, our unit. We had very different world views and ways of thinking. The Social Sciences had an advantage that we struggled with in the Humanities, is that they had a common methodology that they could use across Sociology, Anthropology, History, and Economics, I think. We didn't have that kind of anchoring because we had Communication Studies and then we had History, and Literature, and Creative Writing. We had so many disparate disciplines in our center that it was harder for us to figure out how to ground the major in a common set of theories and methodologies. Anyway. I remember one day Josina – I don't know if I already told this story but – Josina asked us to do some kind of a budget projection or something like that. And I just really had no idea what she was talking about. And I broke down crying because it was so stressful and I felt so inadequate, you know, and I didn't know what I was doing. So the first year was a bit of a roller coaster ride. But one thing that we did put a lot of energy in was the hiring

process. We were very careful in our conformation of the committees to make sure that we weren't going to set people up for some kind of struggle within the committee, you know what I mean? That's one thing you don't want to do. You want to have people who are onboard with the same goal. We were very careful about whom we brought out for interviews. The one lesson that was, a couple of lessons that I learned is that you never invite somebody to campus for an interview that you are not willing to live with because it sets up all kinds of expectations. It doesn't mean everybody is going to work out the way you think they are but we started doing phone interviews which is I think what we did with you, right?

Adler: Yeah.

[1:43:55] Benmayor: Yeah. So just being aware of that whole process. And then we had to track student enrollments. We were involved in recruiting students and having all these crazy recruitment days. We had to work with the community college counselors to get them to understand what we were trying to do so they could bring – you know. . . . A lot of those things started in the first year. But it was essentially, for me it was getting a unit functioning and having some protocols. We had a Faculty Handbook! We started making a handbook for faculty. The other thing that happened in the first year was there was this crazy tenure thing. The first thirteen, I think it was 13 faculty, the first Founding Faculty came with tenure. My group, which was the next 20, came with various different letters. None of us had the same letter from the Provost. It was not a structured thing. It was kind of like, okay, well my letter said I could come up for tenure at the end of the first year. Somebody else's letter said they could come up for tenure after the first semester. A few of us started to sort of talk about this and then one of the Founding Faculty with tenure, Ken Nishita who was the union rep at that point said – and the whole thing with the union was very crazy because, and I'll come back to that about the whole thing about tenure. Anyway, he looked at us and there were like eight of us that had these … everybody had a different letter. He told us, and he is kind of like a rabble rouser, [Chuckles] he likes to do things to push the envelope, let's put it that way, and he said "You should all come up together." So we started meeting with our mentors and about what is it that you want us

to present? Because there were no guidelines for RTP [Retention, Tenure, and Promotion]. And so we went over. They wanted a kind of summary about our relationship to the Vision Statement and then I guess the things that we had published but also our connections to community work. There were seeds of what eventually became the Retention, Tenure and Promotion policy. So there were eight of us and there were 15 faculty with tenure. Those 15 faculty became the committee! [Laughs] So in the middle of all of this craziness, I had to put together a portfolio. So I remember putting this portfolio – I mean I'd been teaching a long time. I've published a lot of things. I had a portfolio. But they didn't tell us you can't present anything beyond the last year before you came here. That's kind of a CSU policy for tenure. Anyway. So I prepared this big fat binder. [Chuckles] I think I must have put articles that I had published and things like that in there. My C.V., etc., and my statement at the beginning which took a long time to write that. And I had a box, a crate full of books that I either had published or I had articles in. So that was the evidence. [Chuckles] It took a long time to do. The committee met in the Spring, I believe. What happened was that the Provost had kind of strategically thought about who he wanted to insure got tenure and he gave those two people the letters that said you can come up in the first semester. But he wasn't banking on the rest of us coming up. And so –

Adler: And who was the President [Provost]?

[1:58:52] Benmayor: Steve Arvizu. Anyway, so we kind of snafued the strategy and we all came up and I got tenure. I think of the 15, I got four "no" votes out of the 15. Or I don't know, maybes, I don't know what it was. And I don't know how I know that but I know it. [Chuckles]. But then later Marsha Moroh told me not too long ago, we were talking about those old days, reminiscing, and she said, "Well, there was Bob van Spyk" - he was a faculty member in Computer Science or whatever it was called then, but anyway, that was the area -- - and he said "Oh, she's the real deal!" [Laughs] with all my books and everything. I thought, "Well, okay, I expected that's what you had wanted." Oh, and we had to include our teaching evaluations and all that sort of thing. So, of the eight of us that went up for tenure, seven of us got it and

one person did not. And that was a big… a big disappointment, I think, for some people. Anyway. So there was that whole tenure struggle in the first year. And the stress of having to put together something. You have no criteria, you know? What are they going to judge me on? I have no idea. And they didn't either. That's the thing. [Chuckles] But they knew they needed people, right? They needed bodies and they needed to have more tenured faculty. Well, that came up against one of the things that was a real struggle in the first year, too because the President, Peter Smith, had wanted, and the Provost, Steve Arvizu, was onboard with this. They were envisioning a campus in which the faculty would not have tenure but would have rolling contracts, like five-year contracts kind of thing. And the union was saying "I don't think so." And the faculty were saying "I don't think so." There were some faculty who were amenable to that. Really, there were. But it was really incumbent upon the faculty to get some policies in place for review of tenure and promotion and that kind of thing because that was our only insurance that this plan that they had would not be pushed through. So we were kind of pushing back on that really strongly. And so for that reason it was also important to get as many people tenured as possible. I mean within reason. So that kind of ensured that I was staying here. [Laughs] Eventually I closed up my apartment in New York because I got found out that I was subletting it illegally. So I had to sadly leave it, which I was going back every summer to New York. So yeah, that rolling contracts thing, Alternatives to Tenure is what it was called, and that was very scary. Very scary. And also it raised the whole issue of academic freedom. You know? These were ideas that were coming from the technocritization of universities around the country, privatized universities, those kind – the Phoenixes. University of Phoenix. And all these alternative Kaplan systems that … and thankfully it's not really gained much ground. So.

Adler: I'd like to go back to HCOM. How did HCOM get it's name?

[2:03:00]Benmayor: Oh, my God. Well, there's various stories about that. HCOM means Human Communication. And the story is that it was already there when I got there, this name. The story was that Luiz Valdez had come up with the name. Now it is a field within Communication Studies, I believe. Or an

emphasis or something. So it's not a term that he totally invented. But I think it means something very different in the field of Communication Studies than we were imagining it, because for us it was an integrated Humanities program. And I was never happy with that name because it… it featured Communication, it didn't feature the Humanities. But the major was put in with that name and it still has that name. But our Division eventually voted to change the name of the Division to Humanities and Communication. But the major still remains Human Communication.

Adler: What does Human Communication mean as opposed to Communication?

Benmayor: Well, I'm not in that field so it's very difficult for me to explain that to you. We'll have to ask Josina Makau about that.

Adler: There we go. Okay. [Chuckles]

Benmayor: Because what we were all joking was "human" communication as opposed to "animal" communication?

Adler: Right, exactly.

Benmayor: I believe it has something to do with rhetoric and ethics and things like that but I'm not sure. I really don't know. I don't want to speak on the record on something I am not sure about. It was never a comfortable name for me. But there was [sic] never enough people pushing against it to change it. So. Yeah. For the Communication Studies people, they were fine with it.

Adler: So when did you retire?

Benmayor: Oh. I retired last December. I can't remember what the official date was but December 2014. Actually, no. Technically, I retired in August of 2010. And then I did a Faculty Early Retirement Program for five years and I taught full time for one semester, in the Fall semester and I had the Spring semesters off. So last fall was my last year of the five-year FERP. It went by really fast.

Adler: Why did you decide to do that at this point?

Benmayor: My body was telling me that it was too tired of the treadmill. [Chuckles] Our workload, our teaching load had gone up from 2:2 – they were four unit classes, so we were formerly teaching two classes each semeste,r and then somewhere in the mid-2000's it went up to three classes per semester. And that is a very tough assignment because for most of us it was three different classes. Most of us didn't have courses that could be taught in various sections. So I was tired, physically tired. I also thought, "Well, how long do I want to be teaching?" And at that point I had turned 65. And I said well, do I really want to be teaching full time into my seventies? I don't know, it was a combination of factors. And other people were beginning to retire, too. Josina went the year before me. You went the year before me. And so I was thinking, you know, maybe this is a good time to do this, I'll sort of ease out of it, because I didn't want to be into my seventies with this kind of a stress load. You know? Even if I was teaching just one semester it's still so much prep work because my courses are so intensive. My Oral History class is a six unit class and it requires a huge amount of preparation, not for the teaching of the methods or the theory but [Chuckles] setting things in place so that students can actually do their interviews on time, etc., very labor intensive class. Latina Life Stories, equally labor intensive because every student is creating their digital story and they need help, individualized help, so that's very labor intensive. Those were classes **[2:08:20]** that gave me a great deal of joy but I was getting physically tired. So I thought okay, well maybe this is the time. And also I think I was thinking about the possibilities of moving out of the area, going to maybe the Bay Area where there is more cultural life for single women --which I haven't done yet. But. [Laughs] But all those things came together. I miss the students, I really do. I miss the contact with the students and I miss the mentoring of particular students because that, for me, has been the greatest joy, I think. Well, there have been many joys to CSUMB. One is creating something from scratch. That was a huge, huge – for me professionally it was one of the best things that ever happened to me because I would never have had that opportunity elsewhere and I didn't fit in well elsewhere because I was too interdisciplinary. So that was one of the big joys. But the other one was seeing students progress and

seeing them blossom and come into their own. Then working with a few students who wanted to go on to graduate school and who imagined themselves having careers and that kind of thing, careers that I knew something about and I could help them with. We've had some wonderful students that are now Ph.D.'s and teaching. We have Judith Flores who is now teaching in Education at University of New Mexico – no, New Mexico State University at Las Cruces, I think. Ruben Espinoza, who was a student that took my "Travel Narratives" class and – very quiet guy, a little bit older than most students, maybe in his late twenties, from Greenfield. He wrote a paper and I said, "Who is this person?!" You know? It was a wonderful paper. And so I called him into the office and I said, "I really liked your paper and it's beautifully written! Have you thought about going on to graduate school?" And he said, "Not really." And so I asked him what he did, you know, what his background was. He had been working as a manager at the McCormick Spice Factory in Greenfield and closed it down. The factory closed. So then he went to community college. He went to Hartnell. From there he transferred over to us. I said, "Well, we have something called the McNair Scholars and you might be interested in it. We are having a meeting in a week or so, why don't you come?" So he came. And he said, "Yes, this is something that I would be interested in," because he wanted to work with youth. A lot of Chicano students want to do that, go into either social work or education. So anyway, but he really – I said, "What do you really love?" He said, "I love history." I said, "Oh, well let's work on that." So he became one of our first McNair Scholars. And he applied to history departments about five different places and he didn't get into any of them after graduating. So I said, "Oh, Ruben, this is really too bad." He said, "That's okay. I'm going to wait. I'm going to work a year, save money and I'll reapply next year." And the next year, I believe it was Cecilia O'Leary or somebody suggested he might look into Sociology and that there was a program at UC Santa Cruz that was very progressive. So I said, "Ruben, go up and talk to the chair. Tell them who you are. Show them your Capstone," which was all about agriculture in the Salinas Valley, the history of agriculture. "Show it to him." So he did that. And it was a match made in heaven because he not only got into Santa Cruz Sociology Department but he got in with

five years of a full ride as a graduate student, which was really unbelievable. And he is now probably working on his exams or writing his dissertation, I don't know. But those are the things that give me great joy, you know? To see that kind of … somebody who had no idea that that could be possible and that all of a sudden you open up those doors. That's so satisfying. I had many students like that.

Adler: That's wonderful. Okay, so who else? Tell us more stories about students. This is wonderful stuff.

[2:13:35] Benmayor: Well, let's see. Students. Well, there's Kristen La Follette who was both of our student. Although she never took my Oral History class. But she took Latina Life Stories and Travel Narratives with me. Now she is teaching Travel Narratives and Oral History for us! She went off, she worked for a while in Special Ed in her hometown. Then one day, out of the blue, she writes me an email saying, "What do you know about this Oral History Master's Degree at Columbia?" I said, "I know a lot about it!" [Laughs] I said, "But you have to pay for it. There's no funding for that." And so she went. And she was in New York for two years and then she called me, I guess it was a couple of years ago, she wanted to go to Spain for the summer because her grandmother or great grandmother, grandmother, I think, was born in Spain. Anyway. So we started talking. And oh, she wanted to come and do the Digital Story workshop at the Berkeley Center. I said, "Kristen, why do you want to do that? You know how to make digital stories. You're not gonna learn anything there that you don't already know." I think they were doing a workshop in Spain so she wanted to do that. Anyway, details aside – and then all of a sudden the lightbulb went on in my head and I said, "Kristen, why don't you send in an application, a C.V. to do part-time teaching in HCOM and come here and work with me on the Oral History projects?" And she sort of thought about it and she decided to do that. So she changed her plans. [Chuckles] And she came and she started teaching Cooperative Argumentation, courses that she had taken herself so it's not like she didn't know the curriculum. She's been teaching for two years in those courses, the lower division courses, and Cooperative Argumentation, which is upper division, and now she is taking over my Oral History class and

the Travel Narratives class! So that's also … she was such an unusual student because she was very serious. Great writing skills. Great thinker. And very creative. I remember I took her to a summer institute in Washington, D.C. of the Visible Knowledge Project, which was a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning project that CSUMB was a part of, some of the faculty, we were a part of that. It was a national project and every summer they'd have a summer institute, bring all people together, etc. So we took Kristen to Washington to talk about her … the digital story that she made because she is a relative of "Fighting Bob," Robert La Follette who was the Governor of Wisconsin and he was a Senator during World War I and the only one to vote against our involvement in World War I. And …

Adler: Ran for President.

[2:16:58] Benmayor: And ran for President, yes, on the Progressive Party. And so she had this history that she incorporated into this digital story. She really produced not just a wonderful story but visually it was very, very interesting. She did a lot of work with superimposing herself on these old archival photographs. And she found all these in the attic of her father's house. [Chuckles] It was, like, "Okay!" And so I thought, "This is really something." And so it's those kinds of projects that are terrific. Yes. So, Kristen. There's many other students I would have to think a little bit more about.

Adler: Well, do. Do. This is gold, Rina.

Benmayor: Yeah?

Adler: Yeah. Like what about the student that's teaching in Las Cruces? What about her family background?

Benmayor: Oh, Judith Flores, yes. She was an undocumented student. Cecilia Burciaga recruited her, I believe. But she had a lot of difficulty because she had no papers and she had to pay these exorbitant tuitions. But she had mentors and sort of a surrogate family in L.A. that had mentored her in high school. And so they were able to help support her college education. But she comes from the region of Veracruz, Mexico. And her mother is a single mother. And she had lots of siblings. And she went to high school in

South Central, which, you know, is a very heavy African American and Latino school there. But I remember she was in a class in which I took a prospective faculty member that we were interviewing to teach a model class in that classroom. And she kept asking these questions. And I said, "Who is this person?" You know?

Adler: [Laughs]

Benmayor: Another one, you know, "Who is that?" And I started talking with her after the class and I said, "Come see me." So she came to my office … because she was asking really good questions. Thoughtful questions. Deep questions. And so she came and she looked around in my office and I said, "Well, Judith, what is it that you aspire to do?" You know, "What do you want to do in life?" She said, "I want to do what you do!" And I said "Oh! okay. [Laughs] We can work on that!" And so she…she was an HCOM major and she got her B.A. And then she got very involved in the Service Learning Institute and they hired her after graduation. Oh, after graduation she went into the Master's of Education because there was no other Master's program on the campus available in anything remotely connected to Service Learning or Humanities. So she took the Master's in Education with Christie Sleeter. At the same time she was teaching introductory Service Learning courses. She and Ellen Correa, who was another wonderful student. So she was still on the campus and she kind of exhausted what she could do here. We didn't have Ph.D. programs. And so she was already now in the School of Education. And I said, "Okay, Judith, we have these friends," and of course Cecilia Burciaga was telling her the same thing, "we have these colleagues at the University of Utah, Octavio Villalpando, who used to be our Institutional Research Director, and his partner, wife, Dolores Delgado Bernal, who is also in the field of Education but cultural – I don't know what their program is called but it's the cultural side of Education. It's not the administrative side of Education. And so she applied to their Ph.D. program and of course got in and she became a star student there. She started this incredible, well she didn't start it but she worked in this incredible program with an elementary school. Her dissertation became working with the mothers of students in that school

about their concepts of cultural citizenship and how they perceived their role as mothers and what kinds of cultural assets they give to their children and how that translates into a school environment, etc. So she was wonderful. Yeah. And then Ellen Correa, whom she also taught with in Service Learning, was a returning student. She had been working for many years in Monterey in the Social Work/Social Services area. And she came back to school when we opened. She was one of our first students on the campus. She's of Puerto Rican background and there are not too many Puerto Ricans in the Monterey area but there are some. She … she decided, too, that she wanted to get a Ph.D. in Communication, and so she worked with Debian Marty and is now finishing up her dissertation at UMass Amherst.

Adler: Wow.

Benmayor: And she is an older student.

Adler: In what? Do you know?

Benmayor: In Communication Studies, yeah. Details about that I am not sure. But yeah. So out of this experiment that I became involved in we can trace it. And it would be very interesting if we could really find out where all the students are these days. But it's very difficult to do that. But really looking at the fruits of our labors.

Adler: Right. That would be an amazing project for one of us to do.

Benmayor: Yeah. It's very difficult because people are all over everywhere. But anyway.

Adler: But the asset is we have the internet now.

[2:23:45] Benmayor: Yeah. Well we have, on the HCOM website, we have a number of testimonies from students who have written in telling us where they are and what they are doing. So that's really lovely. Yeah.

Adler: I have a question but I haven't got it quite formulated so maybe you can help me do this.

Benmayor: Okay.

Adler: We started early on in the interviewing process talking about your background, your heritage, coming from your family, coming from Greece. Then you were in New York and you were in Mexico. We started early on in the early part of the interview talking about your heritage. So I want to talk with you about the connection between your heritage, your family's heritage in Greece and your Spanish speaking background and how that's come to be so helpful in advancing the curriculum, the assets from that experience that you bring to working with our students. I haven't formulated the question but there is some deep connection here, Rina.

[2:25:10] Benmayor: Well, let me just start by saying what my background is. My family is Sephardic Jewish and originally, many centuries ago, from Spain who, after the Inquisition went I don't know where because I can't trace it back that far. But the most immediate, what I can trace back is to the middle of the 19th century in Greece. Well, it was the Ottoman Empire and then eventually became Greece. So my maternal grandmother was born in the town of Volos, which is halfway between Athens and Salonica, Thessaloníki. And my maternal grandfather was born in Salonica but at the time when it was Turkish. It was still the Ottoman Empire. And then my paternal grandparents, whom I never met, were both from the north of Greece from a town called Serres. But they really lived most of their lives in the towns of Kavala and Drama, which are east of Salonika, but not too far, an hour or two hours. And so my father was born and raised in Greece and he didn't come to the United States until 1939. My maternal grandparents met in New York in 1916. So they were part of that early wave of Jewish immigrants. So my maternal grandfather spoke Ladino, which is Judeo Spanish. It's a dialect of 15th century Castilian, with the old Spanish sound system that sounds more like Portuguese than modern Spanish. He spoke Ladino and Turkish. My grandmother was born in Volos, which had become old Greece before the north of Greece was taken over by Greece. In other words, the Ottomans were still in the north. Anyway. So she spoke Ladino and Greek. So Ladino was the household language, which it has always been for 500 years, for more than 500 years, for Sephardic Jews. Not so much anymore, it's a dying language. Or almost a dead language. So I grew up

probably hearing Ladino. I was born in New York and I probably grew up hearing Ladino but, you know, I maybe understood it to some extent but it wasn't my first language. My first language was English. And my parents spoke, their first their common language at the very beginning was Ladino, until my father learned English and so then we were an English speaking household basically. But when I was seven my father took a job working for a company in Mexico City. So we went to Mexico City and lived there for three and a half – four years. And there I went to school. So I learned modern Spanish. And I went to schools in Mexico. I lived in Mexico City in the 50's when you could still see the mountains. [Laughs] To me that was an experience that marked me profoundly, a multicultural experience that was really important in my life. In my later life. And then my parents separated and I came back to the United States with my mother because her parents had subsequently moved from New York to L.A., part of the sunbird migration. [Chuckles] My grandmother had two brothers living in Los Angeles so that became what she did. I went to high school in L.A., in Redondo Beach and went to two years of college at UCLA. Then I transferred to Berkeley and finished my BA there and I didn't know what to do with a BA. It was in Spanish and Political Science. My major was Political Science. My minor was Spanish. I had no idea what to do with that. And in a big university like that undergraduates do not get mentored and so I had no clue what to do. [Chuckles] So I decided to take a teaching credential. So I went into the Graduate School of Education and started taking courses for high school teaching. Very early on I realized that teaching at that level was not for me. It was not particularly something I wanted to do. I did not want to deal with discipline problems with kids. [Chuckles] I got my credential, but ¾ of the way through I decided to apply to the Spanish Department for a Master's Degree. At that time I had also met a few people on the campus, some other graduate students who were in that department and because as part of the teaching credential I started taking courses in my minor, which was Spanish because I would be teaching Spanish in high school. So I had to take some courses. So I became friendly with other students who were in Master's programs or Ph.D. programs and I thought, "Oh, this is cool, I like this!"

[2:31:09] I kind of fell into it. I probably, if I had had more guidance I might have gone into Anthropology instead. But I kind of fell into Spanish Literature and I eventually got my Ph.D. in Romance Languages and Literatures with an emphasis on Spanish. But we had to do French, Italian, Latin, Latin American, Spanish literature and Romance Philology so it was like this really big…it was very inter … inter I don't know what. I guess not interdisciplinary but it was a broad degree. Anyhow, but because of the fact that I had this experience in Mexico and I knew this language it was also in a way my heritage language even though I don't speak Ladino. It's not that different from Spanish but I understand everything. There's Hebrew words and Turkish words thrown in there. But the structure of the language is Spanish, it just sounds different, a little bit different because of the pronunciation of certain sounds. Anyway. So this other language became very much part of me and all of my cousins, for example, don't know Ladino because they never really studied Spanish. And so they don't have access to that language. I do. So that became, for me, a kind of anchor. I remember being in a class in my Master's program on Spanish ballads. And the professor came into the room and he had a tape recorder. He put it down and he said, "I'm going to play you some songs, some ballads." And he pushed the button – that's all he said, he didn't say what they were – he pushed the button and I hear this old lady singing acapella one of these ballads that we had been studying. And as soon as she started singing I immediately knew what it was, that she was singing in Ladino and that she was a Sephardic Jew and then of course the professor explained who she was and who had collected the songs and that she was from Seattle and that professors Armistead and Silverman had done field work there. I knew then and there that was what I wanted to do.

Adler: Oh, what a story!

[2:33:52] Benmayor: Yes, I know. I contacted Professors Armistead and Silverman and I said, "I would really like to do a follow-up study in the communities that you worked in. I want to do my own field collection." Because with ballads, I mean they're oral tradition, you're never going to get the same thing twice. And so they were very excited and they mentored me even though they were not on the faculty at

Berkeley. So that's what I did for my dissertation. And it's been very interesting because 41 years later I get an invitation from the University of Washington to come up and talk about that work to the Sephardic community. It was a large community in Seattle. In the audience were the children and grandchildren of some of my singers! It was wonderful because it was the bookends to my career. I started out with the ballads and I end up in Seattle playing those ballads. And now I'm archiving them for their digital archive. So it's been really joyous to come back to that very old work that I had abandoned. I had moved on to many other things, you know? Because, I wasn't really a medievalist. Medieval literature was not my thing. Ballads were. Oral tradition was. Ethnography was.

Adler: Oral. Oral. Oral. Oral history.

Benmayor: Oral. Oral. Oral. And narratives, you know, because these are ballads that tell stories. And so that became kind of like … and then from there I went on to oral history which was in a similar vein. Different kinds of stories. To me it's all because I have the language. It's all because I have the language that I was able to do that. Even though when I went out collecting ballads I was this 29 year old with a cassette tape recorder and I was going to all these elderly people, two, three, four a day, and they would be plying me with food and singing these songs. Sometimes they would be great versions and sometimes they would be just teeny fragments but it was that field work that I really loved. Going out and talking to people. Nobody told me then, however, that I should just leave the tape recorder running. So I only recorded them singing. I never recorded them telling about their lives. And that's something that I didn't realize until I went back to this material, two or three years ago, as an oral historian. They actually had them digitized for me. I was listening to the interviews and I had to reconnect with – I had to pull out all my old notes, which I fortunately had kept, my field notes because I didn't remember who was who. But I had it documented and of course I published a book. So I had my book with whatever details were in that book about who was who and what ages they were and things like that. But then I started playing the files

back and I realized that I was just cutting off all the external conversation and it so kills me. [Chuckles] It so kills me.

[2:37:25] But here's the thing. So having lived in Mexico, I had a particular I don't know what to call it but appreciation perhaps? Or understanding? in Mexican culture. So when I came to California to live there were a lot of Mexicans here but not like there is now. I used to do Spanish homework for my high school friends, you know, things like that. [Chuckles] But I kind of felt a connection to the Mexican American community. It wasn't called Chicano then when I was in high school. Then going to Berkeley in the sixties I became part of the Ethnic Studies movement, of having Ethnic Studies on campus. Chicano Studies. I felt an affinity with that. So I've always been kind of like a fellow traveler, if you will. An ally. I guess in some ways, I mean, I am Latina but not in the typical way because I have this Spanish ancestry and the Sephardic ancestry. So in a broad sense I consider myself Latina but I don't have the same class or racial experience that Latinos or Chicanos especially in the United States and immigrants, you know, Mexican immigrants have here. But that means that I can, as a teacher, I could work with that material. And so with Latina Life Stories, I understand those writings in a deeper way. It's not just academic or intellectual. I always felt comfortable. And then of course I worked in New York at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies. So, Spanish has been part of my life forever, you know. So I think that's kind of … when I thought about coming to California I thought well, these are gonna be the kids of farmworkers who are going to be in our school, and that I feel very comfortable with. I feel like that's a good thing to be doing. So I think that's … did I answer your question?

Adler: You more than answered my question. And you brought so much to CSUMB.

Benmayor: [Laughs]

Adler: The gift you've given all those students and all of us.

Benmayor: Thank you. Thank you. Well.

Adler: Is there anything else that you would like to talk about that we haven't brought up?

Benmayor: No. Actually I think that feels like a nice place to end. Yeah. It is a nice place to end. And being able to sit back and sort of contemplate what I was able to accomplish this, this, this and this, that's satisfying. That's very satisfying. So I guess I don't know whether retirement gives you that perspective or brings you into that space of reflecting back does. Or whether the … you get to a point where your energy is kind of waned. I [keep] saying there's nothing new in me right now and so maybe this is a good place to stop. [Chuckles].

But I have to say that in retirement I have been absolutely busy, busy, busy with projects up the wazoo. I mean I'm juggling five projects at the same time. This is one of them, our oral history project. I am also co-editing an oral history anthology of works from Spain, Portugal and Latin America in translation. So that's in copy edit stage. And I still have to work on populating my oral history walking tour of Salinas Chinatown. I've got so many … it's a really intensive job of pulling out little clips of stories to pin onto this website. It's very, very labor intensive. But I unfortunately am the one person that knows all the material because the students – I looked at what the students did and I know some of those interviews pretty well. So there's that. And I have a family memoir that's been sitting in the wings for about seven years now. I did some writing on it, some initial writing. And I would very much like to get back to that and figure out what the focus of that is going to be. So yeah, I've got a lot. I've got book chapters and conference papers. So people say, oh, well, now that you're retired you can do everything that you haven't been able to do all your life. And I'm going, "What are you talking about? I've always done everything I wanted to do." I've traveled, I've published, I've taught. I've done all these things. What I really want a break from is teaching!" If I had been in a research institution maybe the balance would have been better. But I don't think so. I'm not a person who can multitask research and teaching at the same time. So now it's time to move to the research that has been in the wings for a long time. Now I can focus on that. So I say I've retired from teaching. I haven't retired from academic work. [Laughs] Yeah. So.

Adler: Well, thank you. This has been a trip. It really has.

Benmayor: Well, thank *you*. Thank you for interviewing me, Franny. We'll turn it off now.

(END OF RECORDING)

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