

10-8-2012

## **Interview with Tony Barrera**

Tony Barrera

California State University, Monterey Bay

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/ohcma\\_chinatown](https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/ohcma_chinatown)

---

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History and Community Memory Archive at Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chinatown Renewal Project by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csumb.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csumb.edu).

CSUMB Oral History & Community Memory Archive  
Chinatown Renewal Project  
Interviewee: Tony Barrera  
Interviewer: Jessica Brightman  
Date of Interview: October 8, 2012  
Duration of Interview: 57:34

**Jessica Brightman 00:08**

Hi, my name is Jessica Brightman. I'm a student from CSUMB working on a project with our HCOM class. I'm interviewing Tony Barrera this afternoon, the District 2 City Council member. And we are working on a project called Chinatown Renewal Project to educate people about the rich cultural history that Chinatown has gone through over the past years, and we want to preserve the communities, the history that people have with their stories in the Latino community specifically, and be able to exhibit it in the Steinbeck Center in April. So, Tony, do I have your permission to record this interview?

**Tony Barrera 00:48**

Yes, you do.

**Jessica Brightman 00:49**

Thank you. So, I'd first like to ask you a little bit about your family and how they came to the Salinas area.

**Tony Barrera 00:58**

Well, I'm originally from Sinaloa, Mexico. We migrated to the border towns areas of Arizona, which was in [unclear]. And from there, we went to the Imperial Valley, where I went to school as a child in high school, and then on to community college in Imperial Valley. And from there, as a young adult, I moved to—came to visit Salinas and I really liked it. And this is home.

**Jessica Brightman 01:35**

Good, good. So, your parents are from Mexico too?

**Tony Barrera 01:38**

My parents are from Mexico, from the state of Sinaloa.

**Jessica Brightman 01:41**

Okay. And what was your family structure like growing up? Do you have any siblings?

**Tony Barrera 01:46**

Well, I have three brothers and three sisters, which I love very much. They all still live in Imperial Valley. One lives in Yuma, Arizona. And I'm the only one way out here. [laughs]

**Jessica Brightman 01:58**

You're the only one here? But did everyone move from there to Salinas, and you all lived here growing up?

**Tony Barrera** 02:04

No, actually, they never came to Salinas to live. They stayed in the Imperial Valley. We all went to school there. One of my brothers, the one that lives in Yuma, Arizona, he was a truck driver for the lettuce companies, so that's how he came to Salinas. He lived here, raised his family, and he decided to move back to Yuma, Arizona, which he lives there now.

**Jessica Brightman** 02:18

So, what made you want to stay here in the area, in Salinas?

**Tony Barrera** 02:32

Well, I really enjoyed the weather, and once my children were born, which now they're young adults, we were involved in the community and their schools. And being that they liked it here—they were born here, raised here—we decided just to make this home, and then we got involved in the community. And then before you know it, I started coming to City Council meetings to address certain community issues that I thought needed attention. And before you know it, I got involved in the process, became a politician. [laughs]

**Jessica Brightman** 03:11

So, to take us back a little bit about your family structure. Did you guys have any traditions growing up in the Imperial Valley that you can remember?

**Tony Barrera** 03:18

Well, you know what? Actually, there are traditions I know when I was a child. It was more about getting together with our neighbors. And, you know, things change from time to time, but we did have gang problems back then as well. We had a lot of issues around the Latino community. But one of the things that I do remember that we would get together on certain local issues to improve our neighborhood. And we would work together with the schools. And I think what was interesting that most of the parents at that time were migrant workers. They worked in the fields. So, they had a lot of things in common, and they helped each other. And for high school kids—when I was in high school, on the weekends, it was easy to go out and work in the field. So, I would get some money for my clothes, school clothes, help out my mom a little bit. It was very easy to do that, so a lot of my friends I remember going—getting on the bus early in the morning on a Saturday. And even on Sunday, sometimes Sundays we'd go out to work. And that was for people that wanted to do that. I had other friends that worked in the clothing stores. It was a lot of fun. It was a good community. But at the same time, there was a lot of problems with drugs. I know I had—I could count three or four of my closest friends that died before they graduated from high school because of substance abuse, and that's a choice. You know, you decide what—how you want to live.

**Jessica Brightman** 04:59

So, you mentioned that you helped your mom with working? What did she do?

**Tony Barrera** 05:02

Well, my mom's an excellent cook. She didn't work in the fields, but what she did is she was the cook of the farm for the farmworkers. So, she would make their lunch, you know, so they could take it to work.

And then in the evening, when they would get out of work, they would eat there, and they would pay so much—I think what was unique, there was some tight relationships where people could just eat throughout the week, because there was a lot of single men as well that left their families in Mexico, for obvious reasons. So, they would pay her on a weekly basis. I remember that, and it was just sort of like the honor system. You know, I ordered so many lunches during the week, I ate so many dinners. And there was no computers, no nothing. It was just, Pancho, you owe me X amount of dollars, and then that was it.

**Jessica Brightman 05:59**

As a child, so what was your favorite memory growing up in the Latino community and in the Imperial Valley with your family?

**Tony Barrera 06:06**

I think one of the important things for me, it was—at that time, it was called the Boys Club. It wasn't the Boys & Girls Club. But the Boys Club had a interesting competition. Once we were out of school, if you would help out at the Boys Club, you know, sort of be a mentor or a tutor, or even clean up in the club, you know, clean the restaurants, help out with the maintenance, they would give you these monopoly dollars. And then at—once a month, they'd open up the store. You got toys and all that, so everybody wanted to see how many dollars you raised. So, it was an awesome incentive, because you weren't asking for handouts. What it was, they would pay you with this play money, but you would actually help in the Boys Club. And I remember this one good friend of mine, his name's Wayne Marshall. I wish I knew where he was at now. But Wayne Marshall and I were the first Boys of the Month. The Elks Club used to have a once-a-month luncheon, and they'd honor the boy of the month. But Wayne Marshall and I, we got so competitive that we tied at the end of the month. It was awesome. That was a nice—good memories.

**Jessica Brightman 07:24**

Good memories? So, how old were you when you were doing that?

**Tony Barrera 07:27**

Well, I remember I was in grade school, and then I think I was in the seventh grade. Then after seventh grade, that's when I started getting challenged, you know, by—again, a lot of people say times are harder now or whatever. I still remember the gangs back then when I was in the eighth grade. I was being challenged as well. So, yeah, they always existed. But I think what was good is the sports program that certain teachers had—music, art, you know, that kept certain kids out of trouble, just like we heard earlier that [unclear] live in Chualar or if he lived there, maybe his life would be different. You know, it just depends who you hang out with.

**Jessica Brightman 08:10**

Your family and—

**Tony Barrera 08:11**

Your family so that—there are teachers even today that do make a positive impact on kids. And I think that was happening with us back then. Wayne Marshall and I, because we grew up together, we never

got involved in gangs, drugs, nothing like that, because we were so busy doing other things, competitive things, like in sports. And so, yeah, I think that—I remember a real good coach is Don Biagi. Not only was he my coach, he was also my history teacher. He was the type of guy that says, "You know what? If you don't shape up, I'm gonna kick your butt." You know, but you could see the love and concern that he had for kids. And you always wanted to please him. So, it was nice.

**Jessica Brightman 09:07**

So, how did you become a community activist?

**Tony Barrera 09:11**

Well, one of the things that was happening here in our community in the Alisal—as a matter of fact, you know, the Alisal, it's in the John Steinbeck book, *The Grapes of Wrath*. So, whoever reads about John Steinbeck knows about our immediate community. You'll find out about Alisal. Some people call it East Salinas. But the Alisal is so rich in a lot of ways that it wasn't getting its due attention. You know, some of our neighborhoods were really bad. Our parks were not in the greatest shape. So, we started making presentations before the City Council. And back then, I just felt, you know what, we're not getting the attention that we need. Not to say they weren't doing nothing or they weren't concerned. You know, sometimes you prioritize in other areas, but we weren't the priority, so I thought, I'm gonna run. I'm gonna put my name out there and see what happens. The first time I lost. The first time I ran against a gentleman, he was a councilmember for twelve years already. I lost. I went and asked him if I could help, you know, do something. He wasn't really interested. So, four years later, I ran again, and I beat him. So, now, I'm sure there's other people that want to beat me now. [laughs]

**Jessica Brightman 10:34**

Yeah, so how did you feel having that experience having lost one election? Did that give you motivation for the next one?

**Tony Barrera 10:39**

Oh, well, yeah, it does give you motivation. And I think if you've got things in the right perspective, where, of course we all get—it hurts our ego when we lose on anything, I would imagine. But it was more of public service. And we—visibly, we have made some positive changes in our neighborhoods through the efforts of many people, because I think as a councilmember, you can initiate to do things, but it requires a lot of money. It requires manpower, and womenpower. So, it requires a lot of people to get involved in order to make it happen.

**Jessica Brightman 11:15**

So, then, being a community activist and getting really involved with the area around here, did you have any connection to the farmworkers movement or what Cesar Chavez was doing in the 60s?

**Tony Barrera 11:27**

Well, you know what? I rode my bike when I was ten years old not knowing who Cesar Chavez was. Now the street that I marched, as he was in the front with—and there was—I remember these people holding the banner of the [unclear]. They were on their way to church. Miguel Hidalgo Elementary was right in front of us, which I went to school. Cesar Chavez led the charge with some farmworkers of the

community. And I was riding my bicycle not knowing the history that was taking place. And I'm sure a lot of great people have some good memories about that. Farmworkers were very strong in the Imperial Valley when I was growing up as a kid, because Imperial Valley was made out of—it was agriculture. What I do remember back then, the farmers had housing for their workers. I mean, even though it wasn't the best conditions, but it was a safe place. It was a community dwelling, where they would have their showers, their restrooms, their kitchen. There was a community. So, all that is gone. For whatever reason, it's no longer like that. But I grew up in the farmworker community. And I strongly believe in what the farmworkers have accomplished. As a matter of fact, here in Salinas, once a year we honor the braceros. There are still men and women in their seventies and eighty-year-olds that are dying off, but we honor them. And we honor the deceased that were—made those decisions of coming to work here, make a better life for their families. And you know, the sad thing about it, they're still fighting for their money, because way back then, Mexico, where they were coming from, said that they were going to save ten percent of their wages, and when they retired, it was going to be given back to them. It's been a struggle. Now what they're being asked is, well, you can show documentation. This has been like sixty years now. Who's going to have their documentation in a suitcase or in a drawer. The same government did them wrong. The same government that brought them here to work the crops here, and both governments work together, but the one that didn't do well was the worker.

**Jessica Brightman** 13:57

So, you said you were there when Cesar Chavez had his march right in front of your school. Were you aware at all what was going on? Or what was it like? What did you see when you were there?

**Tony Barrera** 14:09

Well, I was aware of what it was about, because I knew a lot of the people there, and I knew that they were all farmworkers. But I really did not know—way back then, Cesar Chavez was just starting out with the boycotts and the marches, so I really didn't know much about him, because again, he was just starting out. But there was a strong sense of urgency. People felt like they were being taken advantage of. So, they joined that cause to get the attention that was needed.

**Jessica Brightman** 14:49

All right, so you mentioned you had a lot of different community aspects. You were really involved with the community and what was going on around you. How did you become again interested in elected office specifically?

**Tony Barrera** 15:01

Well, I've learned that if you're an elected politician, you're a policy maker. So, if you already know that there are certain things that need to be changed in a positive manner, you can initiate those things instead of coming before the council and asking, you're going to be the one making the decision. And, of course, if you can get the—there are seven of us city councilmembers in the mayor's position. So, if you can get three other council members to support your cause, to believe in what you're doing, we take a vote, and that will become the majority vote. So, one of the things that I was very interested in the Alisal, right now, as you and I are speaking here, the Alisal, which is considered the bad side of town, the poor side of town, don't even go over there. It's bringing in five million dollars to the general fund of this building where you're at right now. Five million dollars. Well, you're gonna have your

presentation at John Steinbeck here at the museum, Oldtown. You're in Oldtown. They bring in \$340,000. If you look at both areas, you're gonna find out who's getting the monetary attention. You would think you got five million dollars, you go into a bank, they're gonna offer you a cup of coffee. They're gonna give you the best chair in the bank. Well, you would think that's what we would get, but we're not getting it. But yet, we're bringing in more money as a community to the general fund. But you know what it is? We may have the majority of the population of Salinas, but a lot of us don't vote. We're hard workers. We're bringing in real money. But with the politician—you can't help out the politician because you don't vote. So, the politician will go where the majority of the voters are.

**Jessica Brightman 16:48**

So, it's a community effort that everyone—

**Tony Barrera 16:49**

Absolutely. Right now, we have three council members in the Alisal, and we struggle. Think about it. All we need is one more to support us and we got it, but we don't. I don't know what it is with us. Sometimes we don't know how to work together, especially for a certain cause. If you look at some of our areas that have been improved, you'll find out that it took a struggle just to make that happen. But it's happening. Right now in the Alisal, there's one developer that lives in Mountain View, has a whole source of investors. They've decided to stay in Salinas, even through this down economy. They're going to invest \$150 million in the Alisal area. The new police station is going to be a three-story community center. They're not going to call it the police station. It's going to be a safety community center, that's going to be in the Alisal. Not because there's more crime over there, but the thing is, it's going to be centrally located. But in order for that to happen, the decision makers have to come together on what's in the best interest of the entire city.

**Jessica Brightman 18:10**

So, Salinas has always been a really diverse city, lots of different cultures from different parts of the world. As a Latino growing up in the Imperial Valley, what was your experience with diversity?

**Tony Barrera 18:25**

With diversity, there's always the working class. And, of course, most of the decision makers would be the people that hold the money, that owned the land. One of the diversity that is happening now, you're going to find out that a lot of the workers back then are now starting to be the land owners as well. The ones that used to work the fields are starting to be now the contractors, the in-between from the owner of the land versus the workers. So, you bring them together. And it's an interesting dynamic, because if you go into the Alisal area, you're going to find out some of the people that are running the stores now are the kids that just graduated from universities and are coming to work at the store. I know of three young men that come from Jalisco, Mexico. Every single one of them owns their own restaurant. And these kids are probably in their late 20s, early 30s, because their mother and father decided we're gonna build the business, and this is an artichoke farmer, the gentleman here, but he decided to make a plan for his kids. He's got three boys. He's got one daughter. It's just being that we're in the restaurant business, he worked a system where he bought three different restaurants. He worked them. He just recently retired. Every son has a—he says this is yours, do as you will. Make it successful or go broke, but that's on you, which is awesome. And now you see these three young men, they're entrepreneurs

where they're buying other multiple businesses. So, the entrepreneurial spirit is strong in the Alisal. Our Korean population is powerful. And our Koreans are—they don't necessarily live in the Alisal, but they know where the consumers at. So, they come and open their stores, and they hire Mexicans. Why? A lot of times because of the language. And it gives me great honor when I see a Mexican, especially, let's face it, if you're a business owner, you're going to watch that cash register very closely. Chances are, you're going to be the only one getting the money. You'll have your waitresses. You'll have your cooks. But nobody touches a cash register. Only me. You go to a lot of our stores now, you'll see workers doing the cash register. That means there's a sense of honor, of trust. So, as this person is not only learning the kitchen or learning the inventory of dry goods, they're getting the knowledge of how to run a whole store. You go to the Alisal, there's not one single building that's vacated. As a matter of fact, everybody's in business and you see a building, there's multiple businesses inside there. You go to other parts of town, you're gonna see vacant buildings. You go there, industry is booming in our area. It really is.

**Jessica Brightman** 21:34

Do you think that's because of the diverse cultural—the different cultures that are present there?

**Tony Barrera** 21:39

Absolutely. Well, if you come from a third world country—let's face it, if you come from Korea or China, or even Mexico, [unclear], wherever. The only way you're gonna make it over there is if you have your own business. You see a lot of street vendors in these—why? Because that's where the money's at. So, when they come to this great country of ours, the first thing they look is, how can I create my own business? So, yeah, the entrepreneurial spirit is fantastic. At our Salinas airport, we have twenty-seven small businesses that all deal with some form of aircraft. If you go now from those twenty-seven businesses, I would venture to say that about twelve of them are owned by former Mexican employees, because the original owner retired. This person learned the business, and they bought it and now they're doing it. Great opportunities. And they give this knowledge to their kids. A lot of things you've seen in the Latino culture now, it's mom and dad are telling kids, "You're going to college." You know, before it wasn't like that. As soon as you're out of high—I remember when I was hitchhiking to go to college, because the college is right in—because Imperial Valley is made out of a lot of different little towns. So, they established a college right in the center where everybody had equal access to get to this college. And I remember my mom yelling from me from her restaurant, "Hey [unclear]." Because I would hitchhike. I didn't have a car. She thought education was—"What are you doing. Get in here to work." My oldest sibling, he graduated from college. Why? Because my mother started learning that schooling was important. Not only did he get to go to college on his mother's dime, but she bought him a car to get to college. So, see, there was a difference. When I was a kid, it was more about working, make money for the family. Now, the value of education, people understand that.

**Jessica Brightman** 23:42

Where do you think that change happened?

**Tony Barrera** 23:44

I think it's happening because as the parents start working more and more in the agriculture, they start feeling the physical pain, the early hours, the late hours, minimum pay. But they want something better



for their children. So, the message is, I don't want you to end up like me, a tonto over here. But in all reality, they're not tontos. It's a strong work ethic. My mom didn't go to school, but I can tell you right now I learned a strong work ethic from my mother, which is fantastic. It is rare you will see a Latino asking for money. As a matter of fact, you will hear a Latino—and I'm not—this is not to put down any other nationality. But a Latino, before they beg for money, unless they don't have legs or they don't have a certain limb on their body, they'll ask, "Can I cut your grass? Can I wash your car? Can I clean your windows?" That's embedded in this work. We'll work for something. It's that dignity of labor of wanting to do something. So, yeah. And I think it's instilled in a lot of us.

**Jessica Brightman 24:55**

Did that come from family traditions and—

**Tony Barrera 24:58**

Absolutely. You know, in our gang arena, and I've learned it here in Salinas, the dynamics. I don't know if it's the same elsewhere. When kids come—think about it. You're a young person from El Salvador. You hear that there's a better life in the United States. You either hitchhike, you either get on the train. You figure out a way how you're gonna get to this great country. But before you do that, you're either gonna have to go through Guatemala, Mexico. You'll get beat up. You'll get assaulted. I mean, I hear a lot of horror stories. So, by the time a young person from El Salvador comes here, they're not coming over here to join a gang. They're coming over here for a better life. But what happens once they're in the neighborhood, they start finding out because either they don't speak English, or they speak with an accent, or they look different, all of a sudden, they're being challenged. "Hey, well, where are you from?" And because you don't speak the same language, you're shoved a little bit. Before you know it, you're getting beat up. So, where do you start looking? You start looking for people that are going to accept you for who you are. So, I really believe that's the way it starts. It starts about—one, people don't like me. I can't go to school, because they're gonna beat me up for whatever reason. And before you know it, the clique is built. You start getting two or three friends. But before you know it, you're one group. You become another group and all of a sudden, this hatred starts. And it's out of ignorance. But the sad thing about it, ignorance is killing our kids. They forget that if they look at their ancestors, we all come from the same land. But our young people here don't—aren't interested in that. There's just—and I grew up in that environment as well. But I don't know how some people can just look at another one and all of a sudden just hate you because of who you are or what you represent. That's wrong. And that comes out of ignorance.

**Jessica Brightman 27:09**

So, then that was a little bit about the segregation of culture, kind of relates to that a little bit, and how if you come from one area, you might feel different from someone that comes from a different area. How do you see your connections in that experience with the diversity that you were surrounded by, or maybe with, like, relationships with friends?

**Tony Barrera 27:36**

Well, even as a councilmember, now that I'm in this arena, political arena, this arena to serve and better our community. When the city manager here hires department directors, you will never see the—right now as I'm speaking, you will never see a department director—for example, when department

director gets hired, it's coming from San Diego. When they come here, they'll start asking, "Where's a nice place to live?" Even with them and their little quietness, they'll tell you, "Oh, don't move over there in East Salinas. That's an awful place to live." We don't have anybody living over there. We don't have cops living over there. I would venture to say, I hope that we have at least one teacher living over there or something. But people don't want to live over there. So, what that shows me as one of the public servants here, I need to do a harder job, because when there's positive change, you will start hearing it. When we hire somebody as an administrator here, they'll say, "Oh, there's a nice neighborhood in East Salinas. That's a nice place." As a matter of fact, the housing is a little bit cheaper over there. But no, everybody moves to South Salinas, or they'll move out of town. Our city manager lives in Seaside. City manager, you would think they'd live here. Our city attorney lives on Highway 68, the one in Monterey. Not that it's wrong or it's bad, but what bothers me is, you know what, we're not producing enough positive attention that when a new hire comes to the city, or a new police officer gets hired, "Hey, I wanna move over there to Alisal." We don't have that. As a matter of fact, they're told don't even try it over there. It's not safe for your kids. I hear that a lot, and it bothers me. The sad thing is, to some degree it's true. The sad thing about it? You got people—you have Okies in their 80s and 90s that are still living there, the people that came during the Dust Bowl that are still living there. Oh yeah, homeowners. But now you're surrounded by Mexicans. You know, the loud Banda music and the [imitates sound of Banda music] and the—but you know what? They start embracing it little by little. And but I think that the biggest entrepreneurs are growers now, the people that own land. At one time they lived in the Alisal. But they went to college, got educated, liked the entrepreneurship. They started buying, and before you know it, they're the owners now. But a lot of Mexicans think because you're white and you drive a nice car, "Oh, no, you were born like that already." They don't realize that these people came from—they were the little kids from Oklahoma coming for a better life. And they lived in poverty. But now they've done well for themselves, and now they're giving that opportunity to other people.

**Jessica Brightman 30:46**

So, they kind of have the same experience—

**Tony Barrera 30:48**

Absolutely.

**Jessica Brightman 30:48**

—even though they come from different backgrounds.

**Tony Barrera 30:50**

They just had an awesome conversation at Cesar Chavez Library about a year ago. There was some growers when they were fight—when Cesar Chavez was fighting their companies, and one of the growers says, "I cannot believe I'm hearing a building named after a man that used to be my enemy." But now he understood. I mean, it was so awesome that he said as soon as he heard Cesar Chavez building—Library—"I don't want nothing to do with that." Because remember there was a lot of animosity. There was a lot of friction, people dying, but their houses didn't burn. Some of our buses were getting burned. So, it was hard. It was awful. I remember those days here in Salinas. Some of the buses were—they were burning them, and some of the farmers, they were getting their houses

vandalized, and it got bad. But now all of a sudden, the history speaks for itself, where they saw that Cesar Chavez was really trying to help others as well.

**Jessica Brightman 31:55**

And what year about would you say that was? Late 60s?

**Tony Barrera 31:58**

In the early 70s.

**Jessica Brightman 32:03**

I'm gonna shift a little bit back to Chinatown. What are your connections specifically in that community?

**Tony Barrera 32:10**

Well, I'm the President of the Board of Dorothy's Place right now, which is a wonderful place that they feed the homeless. They've done a lot of great things to house and to improve lives of people with dual diagnosis, whether it's drug addiction, some kind of mental illness. Through CSUMB, they've developed a community garden. You know what was so awesome about this community garden? I used to see people that felt that there was no hope for them anymore, when all of a sudden this opportunity of this garden, brought in through the collaboration of the City of Salinas, CSUMB, a great partner. And Dorothy's Place, they give these people an opportunity to be day laborers. You know, you're gonna come in here, work the piece of ground, plant things. People were excited. As a matter of fact, I know two people personally, because of that experience, not that it was a lot of money, but it was just that sense of hope. They were able to get out of Chinatown and be able to get on their own. Get a little apartment, a little studio. Now they got a little job where they do well for themselves. But Chinatown has a lot of history. I know when I first came to Salinas, that place was a mini Las Vegas. We still have several of our original Chinese and Japanese store owners, restaurants. I'll be honest with you, it was bumper to bumper, because there was women of the evening that were coming from San Francisco, Los Angeles, Fresno. These weren't women that were drug addicts. These were professional prostitutes. It was packed with people. There was lights everywhere. It was the place to be.

**Jessica Brightman 34:11**

How old were you around this time?

**Tony Barrera 34:11**

I was probably about, maybe seventeen, eighteen years old. And but what happened, there was card games in the back. There was drinking in the front, billiards in the middle, and then Chinese food at the—it was exciting times. Yeah. And then what started happening gradually as the Chinese business owners started retiring, Mexican people started to work in the kitchens, coming in. And before you know it, there are starting to be Mexican bars, Mexican restaurants. But because of the black undercurrent that was going on, all the illegal things, whether it's prostitution, whether it was selling drugs, or somebody selling beer or wine to minors, you know, businesses started shutting down and became like a ghost town. Finally, Dorothy's Place started happening out there. Through the relationships, which hasn't been very long ago, CSUMB has made a big difference out there. Not only to being effective on getting grants to be able to open up places of opportunity, whether it's a computer lab, whether it's

bringing the clinic, where you can have nurses, doctors. There's a lot of things going on right now. So, it looks like—and now that the City of Salinas—I think the City of Salinas has bought four or five different pieces of land over there. And the reason they did that is because as we start developing, we'll have first access to make it really better to get some apartments over there for people with dual diagnosis, you know, like through Interim. Things are improving. The Buddhist Temple—I don't know if you're familiar with the Buddhist Temple, but they were at odds with the Dorothy's Place, because they really believed that Dorothy's Place was a magnet for the undesirables. But little did we realize that the undesirables—and I say that in quotes, because a lot of people go through some hard times, and they end up in the streets like that. So, what happened, Dorothy's Place and the Buddhist Temple became allies, strong partners.

**Jessica Brightman 36:56**

How did you see that process happen?

**Tony Barrera 36:57**

Well, they started getting together, and I remember being involved in the first initial meetings. There was a lot of animosity, because, "We want you out of here." But I think people from the outside, a lot of times you think you can just corral all these undesirables and take them somewhere, to a ranch out there out of town. But it doesn't work like that. People on the streets are going to be close to where they can get a cup of coffee, maybe panhandle a little bit. You know, wherever there's access for them to—maybe a restroom or something. So, that's been the place right now. But as we're developing, gradually that will start fading away, but remembering that they'll go somewhere else where it's more blighted. So, yeah, it's an ongoing problem.

**Jessica Brightman 36:59**

Yeah. So, then what were the very early memories of Chinatown that you have, maybe in regards to Dorothy's, when you first came a part of that organization?

**Tony Barrera 38:00**

Well, Dorothy's Place started with Robert Smith out of the trunk of his car. I remember him, and that was thirty years ago, giving sandwiches to the poor. Robert Smith was a Franciscan worker. He dedicated his life to feed the poor. As a matter of fact, he lived among the poor, and then he started bringing soup. Before you know it, he befriended these people. People started hearing about his work. People in the—store owners, and people wanted to start helping him. And Dorothy's Place, which is now used to be called the Green Gold Inn, it was—back then several years ago, it was a card playing area, and it was a motel. And it turned into where people could just rent a cheap room, but live there forever as long as you're paying your rent. It got really bad. A lot of drug addicts, a lot of problems, a lot of police calls. And then Dorothy's Place came in, and they were interested in looking at it, and before you know it, the city partnered with them. And there it is.

**Jessica Brightman 39:24**

So, you were working with Dorothy's when it first—

**Tony Barrera** 39:26

Yes.

**Jessica Brightman** 39:27

—[unclear] to be what it is?

**Tony Barrera** 39:28

Mm-hmm.

**Jessica Brightman** 39:33

So, what was one of your most memorable experiences then, working with Dorothy's? As you said, you were in connection with it a while ago when it first opened, and then up until now, what's been one of the most—the things that stood out to you the most?

**Tony Barrera** 39:45

Well, I think the thing that stood out to me back then and today, you get greeted at the—as your community, you get greeted. "Good morning. How are you?" Or, "Good afternoon." Whatever time of the day, you get greeted by somebody. I mean, your sense of value—hey, somebody knows that I'm here. And, you know what's interesting, as it went along, because food was not enough food, but then what started happening, if you wanted seconds, for example—you know, somebody's really hungry, "Hey, can I get a little bit more food?" "Oh, of course." You're treated with a lot of respect, a lot of dignity. Even today, there are people now—it is such a nice place to go, especially if you're very limited income, that it has drawn senior citizens that live in, you know, independent housing, but they live on a strict budget. They'll go over there, even though they're not homeless. They'll go over there during the lunch hour to eat, and to get that fellowship, you know. Just to get that recognition that you exist, you know. And the awesome thing is, after a while, they'll call you by your first name. I think that's fantastic. That's an awesome service. And when somebody dies, maybe because of drug addiction or whatever, they recognize that person. And there's always that moment of recognition to celebrate that person's life. As a matter of fact, here in Salinas, we have the Monterey County cemetery, that a lot of people don't even know it's a cemetery, but people are buried there that didn't have any family. Nobody came to claim their body. A sad thing. But at Dorothy's Place, not only do they acknowledge you, that you went through here, but they'll put your picture up somewhere. I mean, it's an awesome thing. That's powerful.

**Jessica Brightman** 41:57

They recognize you.

**Tony Barrera** 41:58

They recognize you. That's a lot of value.

**Jessica Brightman** 42:03

So, how might that experience at Dorothy's and your work that you're currently doing there fit into the bigger picture of Chinatown as a whole to, you know, kind of create this better environment for the community that's there?

**Tony Barrera 42:18**

Well, one of the things that's a current project—well, there's a lot of small projects that are—they're all coming together somehow. But there's an excitement going on right now that, through the efforts of Dorothy's Place, we're looking to put our first ADA compliant portable potty out there. We're looking for the right place. We're going to do it as a pilot program, for the simple fact that it's been a big problem, because once Dorothy's Place is closed, there's nowhere to go to the restroom out there. So, people just go wherever. It's been a big problem out there. Even small merchants in the area are complaining. That might not be, like, a big deal, but it is. But some people like the idea, others don't, because they say, well, they're going to—the ones that are going to take ownership of it are the drug dealers. So, the dynamics that you and I may not be aware of. You may be at your home. I'm at my home. Your home is—you want to use the restroom? Well, all of a sudden, you got to pay. "How much?" "Well, how much do you have?" So, it's a dark world. So, we're working on all those little kinks. We put a surveillance camera out there. But still, it's difficult. But I think the big project that's right now in the conversation stage, is putting a little park out there, a green space. It's a cement parking lot right now. It's right in front there.

**Jessica Brightman 43:57**

Right there on Soledad Street?

**Tony Barrera 44:00**

Yes. But now we're talking about, man, wouldn't this be fantastic just to—where they can lay down on the park and the green grass. A lot of excitement about that. Plant some trees. Thanks to CSUMB, that's for—it looks like whatever CSUMB has decided—what I like about CSUMB, anything that they've put out there, they brought the community together. "Yeah, so what do you think about that? What's your ideas? What would you like to see there?" That's powerful. "What—you want—you're including me in this decision?" "Of course. Let's do it. It's yours."

**Jessica Brightman 44:39**

It's a community effort.

**Tony Barrera 44:40**

It's a community—and I think that's why it's been successful. You can go out there, you'll start seeing people picking up garbage, because it gets pretty dirty out there. But the ones that are—and it's a small group of people, but they've taken ownership. They want a better area for themselves.

**Jessica Brightman 44:59**

So, then what do you think the future of Chinatown might look like in these next couple years or even decades from now? What do you see as changing?

**Tony Barrera 45:12**

I think the way it's looking, it'll probably be more or less, like, a business area, you know, where you have little small stores. It's gonna take a while. But at the same time, the idea is to maybe build low-income apartments there where people that need to go either to the small grocery store, or even a

restaurant, everything will be in walking distance. But yeah, it's a long term—it'll be a while. But it's coming together.

**Jessica Brightman** 45:53

So, to kind of take us back a little bit on the education aspect of your experience here in Alisal, how did you—could you talk a little bit about more of how you became involved with that district specifically, and why it interests you?

**Tony Barrera** 46:09

You mean just as a private person?

**Jessica Brightman** 46:12

Yeah.

**Tony Barrera** 46:13

Well, I live there, and I've lived in the Alisal now, I think, thirty-four years. I like it. I like living there. And one of the things that—just about a block away from where I live, we have what's called Closter Park. Closter Park is the most utilized park. It's our biggest green space in the Alisal, seven acres. But it was one of the most dangerous parks. People don't want to go there. I mean, you have houses around this park, even one of our biggest Catholic churches in the Monterey County. We have 4000 parishioners, five masses a Sunday. But nobody wanted to go to the park. They were afraid. And so, I would take my kids back then. Now I take my grandkids. And it always bothered me, that negative stigma, especially downplaying my neighborhood that I call home. You know, I always personalized it. So, everywhere I went, I really promoted Closter Park, because it's one of our biggest green spaces, as I said. But Little League teams didn't want to come to that park. Softball leagues didn't want to come to that park. So, we started working on that park. Gradually, more parents started getting involved. We started coming to City Hall to see how we could get help. And now, you know, now it's still one of the most utilized parks. You got a lot of families going. We still have our problems. There's been some deaths. They've killed people out there. But a lot of families are coming. Now we have our own farmers' market out there, where people can go buy their vegetables, their fruits. We just started that on every Sunday. You can go get some pony rides, because that's—same as, you know, for horses, and so, children can go get pony rides, and it's a lot of fun. We have some more—we have what's called the Salinas Boxing Club. They're going to be changing the name of it pretty soon here, but some of our young boxers have made it all the way to the state championships, that we hardly ever hear about them. We only hear when there's negativity going on. But yeah, we got some great kids. We have a computer lab at the park. The Girl Scouts are there now. They have about fifty girls in uniform. So, it's nice. And it's the only—there's a school for—what do you call these children? I'm trying to say—they're a little bit mentally ill.

**Jessica Brightman** 49:12

Autistic?

**Tony Barrera** 49:13

Autistic, thank you. Autistic children. They come to the park, and they have about twenty-five kids out there. And the school is right there at Closter Park. So, it's a vibrant place. And I think that's what got

me started for [unclear] more in the community. And even now as a council member, we were able to convince the International Rotary Clubs—they just invested \$450,000 in that park—and that's private money, which is fantastic—to make improvements.

**Jessica Brightman** 49:55

Some changes?

**Tony Barrera** 49:56

Mm-hmm.

**Jessica Brightman** 49:57

So, then what have been some of your proudest accomplishments, would you say, as a civic leader in your community?

**Tony Barrera** 50:03

I think the most accomplishment that I have right now, that the next Boys and Girls Club that's built will be built in the Alisal. This is throughout the Monterey County. We identified a building. The city bought an old church building. The Boys and Girls Club is raising money to build a new—they're going to tear down that building, and eventually it'll be a Boys and Girls Club. So, you know, sometimes as a policy decision maker, you may start the conversation here, but you'll see the fruition years later. Maybe another council, but it continues. So, I think the prevention programs are very important, you know, where you can challenge the kids. The Alisal High School right now, people are in line to go to that school because of their sports program. Before, parents wanted to get their kids out of there, because it was a dangerous place to go, and now you got people in line waiting to get into their programs. So, that says a lot. We have a state-of-the-art soccer and football stadium. That wasn't through the efforts of the city. That was a school district. But it's a collaborative effort. And then a new housing development was built out there a few years ago in Monte Bella. They built a fourteen-acre park, but Closter Park is still even more utilized than this other park. But a new elementary school is going up as we speak. So, those are positive things, because when you get schools closer to your neighborhood, people—it makes it safer, and people want to move close to where the school's at.

**Jessica Brightman** 51:50

So, and you said the Boys and Girls Club is something you're looking forward to—

**Tony Barrera** 51:54

Absolutely.

**Jessica Brightman** 51:55

—working with. Do you think that came from your previous experience, maybe when you were younger, working with the community and doing those small jobs that you said—

**Tony Barrera** 52:01

Oh, yeah, because the reason I like the Boys and Girls concept is because they bring the family together. It's not a drop-in center. You know, mom and dad or a foster parent or a legal guardian, you



got to be involved in the process. And then every ninety days, they bring you on board, and they say, this is what we're working on with your child. We'd like you to help us in this area. So yeah, it stimulates children's mind in a positive way. So, that's why I'm a big supporter of the Boys and Girls.

**Jessica Brightman 52:39**

So, as a Latino, what legacy would you like to leave behind for maybe younger generations to learn from you?

**Tony Barrera 52:46**

I think one of the things that I like as a politician—you know, a lot of times when you get in the political arena, you're running against someone else, and where it's—like, right now, I'm running against a gentleman that's been there for twelve years. The professional political consultant will say, there's no way you're gonna win. But I think if you create a positive image about yourself, where you can show kids that you can get somewhere or win something just through your work ethic, instead of defaming the character of the other individual like we usually do in politics. I'm wanting to show the kids that you can do something on your own strengths without destroying the character of another person. The gentleman that I'm running against with, I consider him my friend. He's a decorated veteran. I respect him and his position. I just feel that I'm campaigning on his work ethic, feeling that I think I can do a better job, and it's up to the voter to decide. But as long as I know that this chair belongs to the people, not to me, I'll do okay. The politician that all of a sudden takes ownership, you're going to be a very worried individual, because you think it's yours and they're trying to take it away from you. As long as you know it belongs to the people, you'll be all right. And I want to not only educate kids on that, but show them that they can win something on their own terms. That's why prevention—as you grow up in the Boys and Girls Club, when you're being challenged by the time you're eleven or twelve in the negative element, you're going to be able to tell them, "I gotta go to my sports team," or "I gotta go to band practice," or "I gotta go to my track meet. I don't have time for that." You don't even have to worry about it. But if a child is growing and then all of a sudden they're not prepared for the class—"Oh, my stomach hurts, you know, I don't want to go to school." It's because those are the children that you're finding out are going to gangs, because in the gang mentality, you're powerful as long as you know how to fight. You're not afraid, or you pretend you're not afraid. In school, you're strong when you got it here, and you can intimidate a gang member, because a gang member does not have it here. Doesn't even have it here. They call it family. It's sad. It's a facade. Right now at our juvenile hall system—and talking about children, talking about our legacy, we have twelve kids in our juvenile hall that are there for murder. We have seventy-two men that are jailed, that are in there for murder. Something happened there. So, the legacy is that as long as you feel good about yourself, you're going to be able to do something, create something that you will enjoy.

**Jessica Brightman 55:50**

Would you say that for all different cultures, or specifically for—

**Tony Barrera 55:54**

Absolutely. Yeah, because you know what? When I was a kid, it wasn't about school. It was about get to work, get a job, help the family. Now, mom and dad, the same parents, "You're going to college, boy." You know, because they see the value. They see the change. But I've learned that you can go to

college, you can be very book smart, but if you don't have that work ethic from mom and dad, you know, the dignity of being a community person instead of being just an individual, you're going to lose. I don't care how smart you are. I've seen awesome executive directors that have a lot of knowledge here, but no heart. And they're alone. And I've seen other people that are executive directors, but they put their people first. They excel. It's relationships. It really is.

**Jessica Brightman 56:55**

Awesome. Well, that looks like it concludes all of my questions. Are there any questions you have for me, or about the project?

**Tony Barrera 57:02**

No, I just want to thank CSUMB, you know. CSUMB has been a strong ally not only for Chinatown, but throughout Monterey County. And I remember when Fort Ord shut down. We were all afraid, now what's gonna happen? And look at from something very bad, something very good came out of it. So, I think CSUMB has been a good partner in our community.

**Jessica Brightman 57:31**

Well, thank you so much for meeting with us, Tony.

**Tony Barrera 57:33**

Thank you.