

10-22-2012

Interview with Ruben Cortes

Ruben Cortes

California State University, Monterey Bay

Follow this and additional works at: 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.

CSUMB Oral History & Community Memory Archive
Chinatown Renewal Project
Interviewee: Ruben Cortes
Interviewer: Evander Blakely
Date of Interview: October 22, 2012
Duration of Interview: 49:14

Evander Blakely 00:08

I'm Evander Blakely, here with Ruben Cortes. Ruben, do we have permission to interview and record?

Ruben Cortes 00:15

Yes, you do.

Evander Blakely 00:16

Thank you. For starters, where are you from?

Ruben Cortes 00:20

I'm from Salinas, California. Well, originally born in LA, but we moved to Salinas when I was about five. So, as far back as I can remember, we've been living in Salinas.

Evander Blakely 00:35

Where are your parents from?

Ruben Cortes 00:37

My parents are from Mexico. Both my parents are from the state of Michoacán. And Michoacán, it's, I'd say, in the middle of Mexico, so when they came over, they came through Mexico and up to California. So, we're, you can say, a long way from home. A long way from home, yes.

Evander Blakely 01:02

So, when did your parents come to Salinas, and why here?

Ruben Cortes 01:05

Well, you know, from what they tell me, my aunt's husband was working already here in Salinas. And actually, I believe we were on—my dad, he was on his way to either Washington, the state of Washington, or Oregon. I forget which one it is. But my aunt's husband, I invited him to stay here in Salinas for a little bit. And actually, he was able to get a job going, and then he just—he got another job after that. And the weather was good. And my mom, since my aunt was already here, she felt comfortable in Salinas. So, ever since then, we've been living here.

Evander Blakely 02:00

What kind of work did they do when they came here?

Ruben Cortes 02:02

Well, when they came here, my dad was originally working in the celery, which is, like, in the fall, and then also in the lettuce, which is most of the summertime. And so, at first, it was, like, seasonal. But

after a while, he was able to catch on to do yearly work here in Salinas, so that's what they started working in the fields.

Evander Blakely 02:35

They were farmworkers?

Ruben Cortes 02:36

Yes, you're correct. Farmworkers.

Evander Blakely 02:40

What was it like being the child of farmworkers?

Ruben Cortes 02:43

Well, you know, most of my friends, they were in the same circumstances. We as children, mostly of Latino descent, most of their parents work in the fields. And because we were in the same neighborhood, same kind of economic situation, most of the people did work in the fields. So, you know, we get along. We knew each other's problems or what have you. But yeah, most of my other friends, their parents worked in the fields, too.

Evander Blakely 03:21

Okay. Did you have any siblings?

Ruben Cortes 03:24

Yes. Traditionally, in the Mexican families back in the day, there didn't exist Social Security. So, the way it's worked in Mexico is that, well, the more siblings you have or more offspring you have, it guarantees you a little bit easier life as you get older. So, in our case, there was seven altogether. Four boys, three girls. Of the boys, I was the oldest. So, I have one older sister. So, I was one of the older ones in my family. So, total of seven.

Evander Blakely 04:09

Being the oldest boy in a house of seven, what type of responsibilities did that you have?

Ruben Cortes 04:15

Well, naturally, as—both my parents worked, so when my mom was working late, it's either babysitting, or my sister would, you know, maybe just get the dinner started and things of that sort. But just looking after my other siblings is—was our task.

Evander Blakely 04:38

Are there any childhood memories that stick in your head that you would say helped shape you into the person you are today?

Ruben Cortes 04:49

Well, you know, when we grew up in Salinas—I've always liked school. For some reason or another, you know, we always went to summer school, and I remember in our neighborhood, it was pretty

unique. There used to be a bookmobile. There's to be a bookmobile that used to come, I believe, one day a week. And I just can remember just waiting to—for the bookmobile to arrive, to get a new book to look at. And so, I remember as a young kid always waiting for the bookmobile. So, I'm kind of unique.

Evander Blakely 05:28

The bookmobile, was it just based in your neighborhood, or did it go to neighborhoods around the area?

Ruben Cortes 05:35

Yeah, you know, I believe it went to other neighborhoods in our area. And, you know, I don't know exactly how they run it today, but I do know it exists. I know it exists. It's a good tradition to follow in my opinion.

Evander Blakely 05:53

How was Chinatown around the time you was a child?

Ruben Cortes 05:56

Well, the way it broke down, or the timeline breaks down, is that I went through high school and as soon as I graduated high school is when we established a business in the Chinatown area. So, we've been in Chinatown since I was about 18, and right now I'm 43. So, about 25 years, but so most of my memories or what have you is after I was 18. So, I don't have any childhood memories, but I do have memories as an adult.

Evander Blakely 06:33

Okay. Where did you attend school in Salinas?

Ruben Cortes 06:36

Well, you know, when we lived in North Salinas, my elementary school was Santa Rita Elementary. And then—and I believe in the fifth grade, we moved to South Salinas, and I ended up transferring to University Park Elementary. And after elementary there, I moved on to Washington Junior High School. After that, Salinas High School, graduated 1986. Then after that, I stayed local at the local JC, Hartnell College, and eventually moved on to San Jose State, where I graduated in 1994.

Evander Blakely 07:24

As far as diversity in school and Salinas, what type of groups were there, and did you feel comfortable being there?

Ruben Cortes 07:33

Well, you know, when I was in elementary in Santa Rita School in North Salinas, it was more of a mix of ethnic communities, whether they be Filipino, Black, Latino, some white. And after I moved to South Salinas, the majority of my classmates were white, a few Latinos here and there, a few blacks and a few Filipinos, but majority was white when I moved to South Salinas. So, it was a little bit of a culture shock but, hey, you know, you gotta get with the times, so—

Evander Blakely 08:10

Yeah. About this culture shock, what do you mean?

Ruben Cortes 08:18

Well, you know, as I was going through University Park, some of the classes were pretty tough. And so, you know, I did pretty good. And then as I transferred into Washington Junior High School, and Salinas High School, you know, more times than not, you know, we—it'd be maybe, like, one or two Mexicans in the class, and the majority of the class was white. So, you know, it was a little bit different, but I heard it's a little more mixed nowadays. So, it's somewhat different from when I went there.

Evander Blakely 09:01

I understand. At any point in your childhood, would you say it was difficult at any time?

Ruben Cortes 09:08

In my childhood, you know, I had a pretty good childhood. Nowadays, most of the young Latino men in Salinas have been having it a little bit tougher due to some of the gangs or what have you in the Salinas area. You know, back in my day, you know, most of the fighting was done with fists. Nowadays, they shoot bullets, and they don't know where the bullets go. And unfortunately, a lot of young men, you know, they've been casualties of these bullets.

Evander Blakely 09:42

[unclear] So, around the time you was a child, the farmworkers movement began to farm. Do you have any memories of that or involvement or anything?

Ruben Cortes 09:57

You know, I remember my dad, he's seen—I know I don't remember the exact details—but back in the day, there used to be strikes. And I believe, you know, some of the workers had to cross the picket lines, and the threat of violence was always there. But, you know, I don't know exactly—back when I was maybe, like, four or five, I remember something like that. But I wasn't able to pick up on what the exact details were. But as I got older, I read about it a little bit, and so I know a little bit about it.

Evander Blakely 10:41

Earlier, you mentioned that you attend San Jose State.

Ruben Cortes 10:45

Yes, I did, from 1990 to 1994.

Evander Blakely 10:50

Can you describe how that was?

Ruben Cortes 10:52

Well, you know, my first year, I was able to stay at the dorms. And, you know, I've always worked. And so, when I first stayed at the dorms, it was being a student 24/7. And so, I wasn't really accustomed to that. And so, after my first year at San Jose State, I decided, well, for my time remaining, to commute,

and be a part-time student because school is not cheap. And so, I had to do what I could do to work a little part-time job here and there and pay for my classes. And back in the day, the school tuition was okay. You know, it wasn't that expensive, but now it's outrageous. I don't know how you students do it, but I feel for you. I don't know, you know, what the future holds. But just hang in there. It'll get better.

Evander Blakely 11:55

Thank you. Thank you. Did you—you said you moved home, back to Salinas, when you were in college?

Ruben Cortes 12:05

You know, I—yeah, we moved home. I moved home. And most of my classes, I tried to get them either Tuesdays and Thursdays or Monday, Wednesday and Friday. And so, I was able to get my classes in either two or three per semester. What did me in was doing the group projects. You know, I had scheduled my classes either Tuesday and Thursday, and then maybe as a group project, they wanted to meet Thursday and Friday. [chuckles] So, I'd end up, you know, doing a little bit extra time on the road, but it was okay. It was worth it at the end.

Evander Blakely 12:43

[unclear] commuting from Salinas to San Jose?

Ruben Cortes 12:49

Yes, back in the day, and this was back in 1990, CSUMB was in its infancy. It was barely getting off the ground. So, at that time, either my choice was UC Santa Cruz, which I liked very much, and also San Jose State. And I chose San Jose State because it was a little bit more—they had the major, what I kind of wanted to focus on, whereas the UC was still, I believe they called the econ major. Whereas in San Jose State, it was a business major. Specifically, you had a minor in finance, accounting, or marketing, and human resources or—it was a more [unclear], so I chose San Jose State. That was really my only option was for—after graduating from Hartnell, you know, it's either, you know, for me, something close, which was one of those two schools.

Evander Blakely 13:55

I understand. What did you major in?

Ruben Cortes 13:57

Well, you know, I majored in business administration. And as I said before, within business administration, you have a concentration, which was either finance, marketing, human resources, and some other subjects. But I chose finance, and you had to have a minor, and my minor was advertising.

Evander Blakely 14:26

Why did you choose advertising?

Ruben Cortes 14:28

Well, you know, I needed something simple, because those finance books, they can be pretty dry. Very dry.

Evander Blakely 14:36

So, you grew up here, you went to college, you were a business major, and now you own a business, right?

Ruben Cortes 14:42

Yes, yes, I do. We own a business. We own two. We have a hotel that we bought in 2006. And next door, we have an automotive dealership that we have. It's been there since 1987.

Evander Blakely 15:00

Where are your businesses located?

Ruben Cortes 15:02

One is—they're both along Market Way, right on the corner of Market and Sherwood. And then the other one is at the corner of Market Way and California.

Evander Blakely 15:12

Okay, is there any particular reason you chose that area?

Ruben Cortes 15:17

Well, you know, back in the day—when I say back in the day, in 1987—it was an area that was reasonable in terms of price. We were renting first, and then we were able to buy, but rent in that area in Chinatown was reasonable. So, that's our major—that was our major deciding factor, why we went into Chinatown, because the price was right.

Evander Blakely 15:47

I understand. Are you in it alone? Are your siblings with you or is it a family type of thing?

Ruben Cortes 15:55

Right now, my siblings, they work other jobs. One is in San Diego, and I have a brother who works in plumbing, and one that works in truck driving. And I handle the business by myself.

Evander Blakely 16:16

About your hotel, do you know the history behind it?

Ruben Cortes 16:19

Well, you know, we bought that place in 2006. So, I've asked around a little bit, and from what I gathered, it was built somewhere around 1950. I really don't know too much about it. But, you know, we—as I continue to speak with some of the older neighbors, they—hopefully I will get a little bit more history of what that place holds in the neighborhood there.

Evander Blakely 16:50

The hotel is kind of historic within the Filipino and Chinatown community, and now you have it. How do you feel about that, as a big, Filipino landmark in the hands of a Latino?

Ruben Cortes 17:05

Well, you know, most of the businesses in Salinas are starting to be tailored towards the Hispanic community, and some of them are owned by the Hispanic community. So, as our population grows within Salinas, I believe it's a natural occurrence that we as Latinos buy some of the businesses and run some of the businesses, and so it's a natural progression. You know, it's just, like, evolution.

Evander Blakely 17:44

As a Latino that grew up in Salinas, what does it mean for you to have your own business here now?

Ruben Cortes 17:51

Well, you know, most of the customers that we do have, I'd say 75% are Latinos, and then the other 25%, whether it be white, black, or Filipinos, or Asian, or what have you, but because we're Latino owners, we can cater to our community and relate to some of the customers' worries or questions that they might have.

Evander Blakely 18:23

So, it means a lot to you to own a business here, right?

Ruben Cortes 18:28

Yes, it does. You know, it's been tough. Sometimes when economic times are difficult, it's not easy, but you just hang in there and hope things get better. Yeah, you know, owning a business is not an easy job. You know, sometimes you got to work late hours, but yeah, you feel comfortable, you know, being your own boss—at least I do. I like that aspect.

Evander Blakely 19:02

You mentioned it being hard. What do you mean by that? What kind of difficulties have you experienced?

Ruben Cortes 19:09

Well, you know, sometimes dealing with insurance companies and sometimes all natural processes of business, whether certain products turn out bad or just basically when you're a business owner, sometimes you're the first to come in and last to go. And so, you know, customers come and go and employees come and go, but you always have to take care of most of the details, and so that gets to be sometimes pretty tiring, but if it goes well, you know, you benefit from the fruits of your labor.

Evander Blakely 19:47

Understandable. Would you view yourself as influential to those young people growing up in the Salinas community now, saying that I came from the same community that you came from, and now I'm a business owner, and I have something that I can call mine? And how does that make you feel?

Ruben Cortes 20:07

Well, yeah, you know, as I was stating before, some of our youth, some of the Latino men in the community, young men, like to use guns instead of fists if they have a problem. And so, you really can't

take that bullet back, whether, you know, you're going to receive that bullet or aiming that bullet, it just puts you in a bad spot. And so, you know, it just points you in the bad direction and, you know, if you go the other direction, you know, you just have—you're open to other possibilities that can benefit your life. And for me, you know, I just choose not to follow their path, and so I follow other paths. And we just look to certain people, whether, you know, it's role models that you have in school or role models that you have in your family, and go that route and, you know, hopefully create a positive environment for, you know, for your own family and for—so you could eventually be in that role model that people can look up to.

Evander Blakely 21:28

I understand. Since your business is located in Chinatown, do you feel a special relationship within that community? Like, are you active within that community?

Ruben Cortes 21:42

Yes, I am. Specifically, we have a board that meets every month. And right now, I co-chair that board. The name of the board is the Salinas Downtown Community Board. And right now, we're—our major emphasis is revitalizing Chinatown. One of the projects that is the outcome of the board is the Republic Cafe, which I'm sure you're familiar with.

Evander Blakely 22:13

Yeah.

Ruben Cortes 22:13

And so that eventually will be a museum to store some of the Chinatown historic items and the history, and hopefully be a cafe and museum and be something positive for the neighborhood. Other aspects of the board is dealing with revitalization. And slowly but surely, we're progressing on that. We have a number of projects in the works. And so hopefully, with some of those projects, we're able to help some of the residents in the Chinatown community, specifically some of the homeless that have issues, and give them a hand there.

Evander Blakely 23:00

I understand. What does it mean to be Latino sitting on a Chinatown renewal board?

Ruben Cortes 23:10

Well, you know, from my point of view, you know, it's a little bit difference. And I used to just attend and—but slowly but surely, everybody takes a position, you know, whether it be secretary or in my case, being a co-chair now, and, you know, we kind of do, like, a round robin kind of deal. And so, everybody takes a position here sooner or later. And so, it just so happens it's my turn now, and so it's challenging at times, but I see the inner workings of how organizations work and different boards, how they work. And so, it's interesting to me.

Evander Blakely 24:04

Do you believe the goals of this project will bring about change in the community?

Ruben Cortes 24:10

I believe so. You know, specifically, as I stated before, some of the homeless have certain challenges, and whether they be mental challenges or physical challenges, you know, it's a matter of finding the right options for them, and maybe getting them to a specific office or what have you, and helping them out in some form or manner.

Evander Blakely 24:45

What inspired you to join the project? What was your hopes in—

Ruben Cortes 24:51

Yeah, well, you know, what inspired me was that CSUMB came into the neighborhood, and it was something different, and I just wanted to find out, you know, what was it about. And so, it's just everything has been positive since CSUMB came aboard. And that's one of the reasons I'm here doing the interview with you is, you know, in a way to say thank you for coming down to our neighborhoods, showing interest in our neighborhood. And so basically just paying it back, you know, because I remember when I was a student in San Jose State, and we had certain projects like these. I know how it was. And so now, I'm—roles are reversed now. I'm the one that [laughs] coming down to help you guys out. So, CSUMB has been just a real positive in our neighborhood, and anything to help CSUMB, you know, I'm all for it.

Evander Blakely 25:52

Thank you. We appreciate it. Do you believe more Latinos should be involved in this project, or more people in general?

Ruben Cortes 26:00

Yeah, definitely. You know, there's certain projects that we want to accomplish. And so, it takes a lot of people to get some of the details accomplished. There's a lot of volunteer opportunities. And so, the more the merrier. I know in Chinatown there is a number of Latino businesses, but unfortunately, most of the volunteers that we do have are from the city or social service providers or from church organizations, and so not too many Latinos. [chuckles]

Evander Blakely 26:50

The area is known for a large amount of homeless people. Not the Chinatown Renewal Project, but what has your business has anyway helped the community?

Ruben Cortes 27:06

Yes, specifically, we—when I say the business, the hotel business—we house some of the people who are through the mental health through the county. And so, we've been able to give and take, you know, we help them out by taking in some of their clients. And some of those clients are homeless individuals. So, we provide room for them. And, of course, they provide money or [unclear] or rent money. And so, it's a give and take, like I said, you know, we try to help them out. And, of course, they help us out. And so the homeless in the community, yes, we do help them out when we can. We take them in on the weekend.

Evander Blakely 27:59

So, you would say your business is very beneficial to the community?

Ruben Cortes 28:03

Yes, I would say so. I mean, if you ask some of the people along Soledad Street, you know, we've helped a number of people out, yes.

Evander Blakely 28:14

You mentioned that you've been there since 1986.

Ruben Cortes 28:18

Since '87. [laughs]

Evander Blakely 28:19

'87. Sorry about that. I know you've had some interesting occurrences and memories that build it up over time. Can you share any with us?

Ruben Cortes 28:33

Well, you know, specifically, you know, it's more dealing with the hotel. And like I said before, you know, there's a number of homeless people in Chinatown. And so, after a while you get to know who they are and what have you, and it seems like everybody has a story. Some people just out of different situations in life, whether they've been into drugs, or they've just had psychological problems, you know, you get to know them a little bit. And so certain people that you would think you'd never be friends with, you know, after you get to know them a little bit, you know, you get to find out, you know, what their situation is and you get to know them a little bit. And so, like I said before, to certain people in the neighborhood where I thought, wow, I don't know what his problem is or what his situation is, and it just sometimes turns out that they become our tenants. So, you know, specific situations, I would say, taking in tenants who you don't think you'd take in.

Evander Blakely 29:54

It sounds like you made a good relationship with the people around you. Are there any specific people that you can maybe talk about, or give us the story about how you met or anything of that nature?

Ruben Cortes 30:14

Oh, well, there's this individual, I won't name him by his actual name but, you know, there's this individual who just all of a sudden appeared in our lobby, and I was kind of taken aback. It was like, wow, what's this person doing here? And he said, "Oh, yeah, you know, I need a room." And it turns out that his other place—I'm not sure what the circumstances were, but I guess he wasn't allowed to have cable. And he asked me, "Well, if I were to stay at your place, would you help me out with some cable?" And I said, "Okay, yeah, sure, we can try to work on that for you." And, to this day, you know, he's been like a perfect tenant. Perfect tenant. And at first, like I said, when he arrived in the lobby, I kind of sat back and said, well, who's this person? And, you know, like I said, little by little, you get to know certain people, and then you understand what kind of circumstances they come from. And so, you know, I'd say, you know, just get to know people and they'll surprise you.

Evander Blakely 31:31

It sounds like you went through a lot of hard work growing up, owning your own business, going to school. Would you—what words would you say to somebody who wants to be in your position? What steps would you tell him to get there?

Ruben Cortes 31:55

Well, you know, I would say, you know, get as much education as you can, and pick something that you like. In my case, I've always liked cars and things of that sort. And so, as I say, you know, pick something that you don't think it's work to you. You know, and certain people they like doing certain jobs, and if it's something that you like, it just won't seem like work. And so, I would say follow that route after you could get as much education as you can under yourself. That'd be a positive route.

Evander Blakely 32:28

Because your parents were farmworkers, do you have any, let's say, any fund set up for, or anything to say to those people working the fields, like, because your parents been there, they did that? And I understand it's hard, and what would you have to say to those people?

Ruben Cortes 32:54

Yeah, you know, it is hard work, and it's honest labor. But, you know, there are other opportunities, because, you know, the body wears down after a while, so you really can't be working out there, you know, too long. And so, sometimes it's just a little bit easier to find, you know, some way to get some education. I know a lot of farmworkers sometimes they take night school, you know, trying to get their GED or what have you. And so that's a positive step. You know, just keep working at it. I know it's tough. But, you know, through education, you know, you get somewhere.

Evander Blakely 33:37

Are you familiar with the Bracero movement that took place here and—

Ruben Cortes 33:43

You know—

Evander Blakely 33:44

—are any of your—anybody close to you or any relatives that you know that were involved in the Bracero era?

Ruben Cortes 33:51

You know, I read about it. I'm not too familiar with the details. But no, I can't say that my parents were in the Bracero movement, but like I said, I've read about it. I know a little bit about it, but no, as far as my parents being involved in it—

Evander Blakely 34:17

Okay. Are you—do you feel like at any point that you want to pack up and leave the area? Are you tied to this area and this is home for you?

Ruben Cortes 34:32

Yeah, you know, when I finished school, that was an option. It was either, well, find a job somewhere out there in San Jose and, you know, start from scratch, or, you know, come back home and, you know, just be around somewhere where I'm kind of, like, familiar with and some of them are my people that I know, and I feel a little bit more comfortable with here in Salinas. So, that's why I came back home.

Evander Blakely 35:00

Are you married?

Ruben Cortes 35:02

I'm engaged, yeah. Pretty soon tie the knot there.

Evander Blakely 35:09

[laughs] So, other than your wife, what holds you here, like, what do you say?

Ruben Cortes 35:18

Well, you know, we have a number of investments that are real estate. And so, you know, it's just always good to kind of keep an eye on your holdings, you know. What I hear, from what experience tells me, is that if you have certain real estate, you want to not be more than an hour away from your investments. And so, my fiancée, she has a number of investments too. And so, you know, we were kind of tied to the community that way through [unclear]. Plus, you know, we have relatives that live close in the area and so that ties us here to the community. And so that's why we stay here.

Evander Blakely 36:04

Your business being based out of Chinatown, do you receive a lot of clientele in that area or are people kind of scared away because of what the area is known for?

Ruben Cortes 36:14

Yeah, I'd say yes and no. You know, we do because we're, you can say, in East Salinas more than other parts of Salinas. We're in East Salinas. And so most people when they come to East Salinas, well, they expect it's a little bit more tougher part of town. But Chinatown makes it a little bit more difficult getting customers in because of the area, you know. There's a lot of homeless around, and so sometimes people are a little bit weary going into the neighborhood but, you know, as soon as you get to know the neighborhood, it's really not that bad.

Evander Blakely 37:07

With the Chinatown Renewal Project, is that what you—do you hope by renewing and restoring the area will bring more business to your—

Ruben Cortes 37:17

Yeah, eventually, I think it would be a positive aspect out of the renewal process as renewals starts to take hold through different parts of the neighborhood. Yes, I think it will eventually attract different

clientele that would not necessarily come into Chinatown now. But in the future, if they feel that it's safe enough for them to enter, I do think we'd get additional customers through the renewal process.

Evander Blakely 37:51

Okay. I'm going to stay with the Chinatown—

Ruben Cortes 37:59

Sure.

Evander Blakely 37:59

—theme. Okay, so it's an area notorious for drugs and things of that nature.

Ruben Cortes 38:10

Yes.

Evander Blakely 38:11

Have you had any experiences with that with your business, like, anytime you had to put the hammer down, like, yeah, I have to get away from here or—

Ruben Cortes 38:22

You know, I think it—in Chinatown, most of the drug trade is along Soledad Street, and we're one block down, and it's just—it works out. They're not really concentrated, you know, in our neighborhood. I mean, in our—where we have our businesses, but they are on Soledad Street. So, you know, I really just don't go down to Soledad Street other than when we have our board meetings. So, it really is limited as to affecting our business, so—

Evander Blakely 39:00

I mentioned the history of your hotel. Are you familiar with the history of the Republic Cafe?

Ruben Cortes 39:06

You know, I know a little bit about it, not too much. I do know the owner. And he's shown me some pictures of the past when they used to be, you know, the place to be, or the place to get some food. From what I understand, it was a really happening place. But naturally through time as people move out of the area, and as his relatives go in to different businesses, you know, it's been on a slow decline, but I believe it's going to be a cultural center, a museum. And I think CSUMB is going to have maybe a classroom there, I'm not sure. But, you know, it's going to rebound, and it's going to be a positive aspect in the neighborhood.

Evander Blakely 40:00

Yeah. What stamp do you want to leave on the community?

Ruben Cortes 40:05

Well, you know, as I mentioned before, we have a couple of businesses there in Chinatown. And so, I eventually want to pass them on to my kids or my nephews and see it continue down the line. And so that's what I'd like to leave, is something that we started, and hopefully it'll be there when we get older.

Evander Blakely 40:37

I understand. At your business, do you sell cars or do you mainly fix them?

Ruben Cortes 40:45

No, we sell. We sell pickup trucks. We sell trucks.

Evander Blakely 40:49

Okay, why? Why sell pickup trucks and that's it?

Ruben Cortes 40:54

Well, you know, it's something that—it's our niche in the business. We just feel that if somebody needs a pickup truck, they know where to come. And so—

Evander Blakely 41:07

[laughs]

Ruben Cortes 41:10

We just like—they're easier to work on, you know, when you need to fix something, a pickup truck normally has a lot of room to work in under the hood or what have you. When you go to compact cars, everything is kind of, like, tight, tight compartment, and so it's a little bit tougher to work on.

Evander Blakely 41:33

Yeah. Did you grow up here in the 70s and 80s?

Ruben Cortes 41:43

Well, you know, I—

Evander Blakely 41:43

Mainly the 80s?

Ruben Cortes 41:45

—graduated in 1986, in high school. So, you know, I can say 70s and 80s. Yeah.

Evander Blakely 41:50

In what ways have the city changed?

Ruben Cortes 41:55

Well, you know, as I mentioned before, back when we were kids, we—when there was an altercation or what have you, we used to throw water balloons or fight it out with our fists. But nowadays, you know,

Salinas has been notorious for gang movement, and just the spraying of bullets everywhere. I mean, it's just kind of getting out of hand. And so, you know, we got to own it. Something in our family structure has gone wrong, and we just need to correct that, you know. We need to raise our kids a little bit better, and start raising them when they're young. When they're a little bit old, it's a little bit too late. And so, we need to work on that as a—as Latino men and women, we just need to do a better job at parenting our children.

Evander Blakely 42:50

If you were able to send a message to those people, what would you say? I mean, the young people, not their parents.

Ruben Cortes 42:56

You know, just stay away from gangs and stay out of that environment. Just look to other options. I mean, it's just—you really can go far nowadays and just step out of Salinas a little bit and explore different areas, and you'll see that there's other options than the gang life.

Evander Blakely 43:29

What do you feel are your main issues and main concerns that need to be addressed within the community? Not just the gang violence, but as far as education, labor? What do you feel are the main issues that need to be addressed within this community?

Ruben Cortes 43:50

Well, you know, always—crime isn't always an issue, but, you know, being that we're in business always, you want to have other businesses come down to Salinas. I know one business is pulling out—Capital One, which employs a lot of people. And so, you know, we want to have Salinas attract more companies and create opportunities for different professionals. And so, we feel that Salinas needs a shot in the arm from the business community, something to help the people who are in Salinas, you know, find a positive working environment.

Evander Blakely 44:45

What—would you say that you give opportunities to community members within your businesses? Like, would you hire people from this community or—

Ruben Cortes 44:59

Yeah, definitely. When the time is right and the economy improves a little bit, yeah, certainly. You know, hiring local is always the best, you know. And so, I think that, like I said before, as companies start to pull out, hopefully other businesses will want to pull in and take advantage of that workforce that is here in Salinas.

Evander Blakely 45:33

So, you open your business to the homeless, you sit—

Ruben Cortes 45:37

Yes, we do.

Evander Blakely 45:37

—on the Chinatown Renewal Board.

Ruben Cortes 45:41

Yes, I do. [laughs]

Evander Blakely 45:41

What other ways are you involved in the community, or is that basically—

Ruben Cortes 45:46

That's my day, basically. You know, work and then volunteer some of my time, and that's it. Go home and do it again the next day. So, that's what I do now. [chuckles]

Evander Blakely 46:01

Is there any time where you say, this is too much—like, I sit on the board, I do all of this, I got businesses, I just need a break?

Ruben Cortes 46:13

Yeah, sometimes, and so that's when my fiancée steps in and says, "We need a vacation." So, you know, we plan out vacations, and so we take care of it that way. And it's just sometimes it does get, you know, stressful after a while, you know, working long hours, but, you know, you've just got to plan out your vacations and make sure you get some time off.

Evander Blakely 46:42

What life values do you feel that you learned growing up here?

Ruben Cortes 46:47

Well, you know, Salinas is a tough place. You know, sometimes other youth in different cities have more, I guess, fun activities. And growing up in Salinas, it's a little tough. You know, not that many fun things to do for young people, and I understand that. And so hopefully in the future, we'll bring more fun activities for the young people to get involved in. But—sorry, lost track. What was the question? [chuckles]

Evander Blakely 47:21

What did growing up here teach you basically about life, about the value of education?

Ruben Cortes 47:27

Yeah, just hard work. You know, basically, it's hard work. And so, we just continue to work hard, and positive things happen.

Evander Blakely 47:36

Good. Are there any other forms of business that you plan to open? Are you planning on expanding or—

Ruben Cortes 47:46

Well, like I said before, you know, the economy's a little tough right now. But in the future, yeah, maybe we'll think about expanding, but for now, we just—just trying to pay our bills. [chuckles]

Ruben Cortes 47:47

I understand. Is there anything that you would like to share that we haven't covered?

Ruben Cortes 48:10

No, I just want to reiterate and thank CSUMB for coming into our neighborhood, and showing an interest in our neighborhood, and definitely taking the lead and having, like, what they call a learning center there. I know a lot of residents in Chinatown use the computers at the learning center, whether it be to build a resume or to check their email or what have you. And so, it's just—from what I hear in the neighborhood, people use it and they love it. And so, I love CSUMB for coming down and just taking an interest in the neighborhood and helping people there. So, thank you.

Evander Blakely 48:59

Thank you. [chuckles] That's about it. Thank you.

Ruben Cortes 49:01

Okay.

Evander Blakely 49:06

Thank you.

Ruben Cortes 49:08

Alright. That wraps it up.

Evander Blakely 49:12

[laughs]