

**PROYECTO MISSION MURALS**  
Oral History Audio Transcripts

**BROOKE OLIVER ORAL HISTORY**  
San Francisco, July 20, 2021

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This is an oral history of lawyer Brooke Oliver for the *Mission Murals Project*. I'm Camilo Garzón. It was recorded on July 20, 2021, inside of a conference room at 50 Balmy Law, which is at the heart of Balmy Alley. The voices you'll hear will be those of Brooke and me. As soon as I met Brooke, she gave me her business card.

This oral history delves into facets of Brooke's early life, her upbringing, meeting her wife, Elba Rivera, alongside Susan Cervantes, Irene Pérez, Ester Hernández and others the same night, and how her law career placed her at the forefront of visual arts legislation in the United States. We talk about the cases she has defended in front of the Supreme Court; her law practice; about social justice issues related to race, sexual orientation, gender expression, among others; her work as a self-described "cultural justice warrior"; and her role in helping preserve and amplify Chicana and Latinx heritage in San Francisco's Mission District and beyond.

Here is the oral history.

*Esta es una historia oral de la abogada Brooke Oliver para el Mission Murals Project. Soy Camilo Garzón. Se grabó el 20 de julio de 2021, dentro de una sala de conferencias en 50 Balmy Law, el cual está en el corazón de Balmy Alley. Las voces que oirás serán las de Brooke y la mía. En cuanto conocí a Brooke, ella me dio su tarjeta de presentación.*

*Esta historia oral ahonda en facetas de las primeras etapas de la vida de Brooke, su crianza, el conocer a su esposa, Elba Rivera, junto con Susan Cervantes, Irene Pérez, Ester Hernández y a otros esa misma noche, y cómo su carrera legal la colocó al frente de la legislación de las artes visuales en los Estados Unidos. Hablamos acerca de los casos que ella ha defendido ante la Corte Suprema; su carrera de abogacía; acerca de la justicia social con relación a temas de raza, orientación sexual, expresión de género, entre otros; su trabajo como una autodenominada «guerrera de justicia cultural»; y su papel en ayudar a conservar y divulgar la herencia chicana y latina en el barrio de la Mission de San Francisco y más allá.*

*Aquí está la historia oral.*

**CAMILO GARZÓN:** All right, so I'm here with Brooke Oliver, and we are inside of 50 Balmy, which to me is very surprising because I've been around here passing Balmy Alley a lot, many times doing this project. And Brooke has been part of this whole Mission murals [movement]. And since the seventies and eighties, these murals have been very important pieces of work.

And you've done something very specific in terms of how to understand visual arts under the law. And those repercussions are not only local and state; they are also global because it is San Francisco that really made sure that we respect murals as an art form across the world. Before we get into all of that, I would love to hear you say your name, full name, and your upbringing. Where were you born?

**BROOKE OLIVER:** Hi. My name is Brooke Oliver. I was born in Denver, Colorado, and I was raised in Tucson, Arizona, right on the border.

**CG:** Those two things. What of your upbringing do you remember most in both having the Colorado, the high altitudes, but at the same time going through the desert and how these kinds of very interesting, in many senses contradictory, microclimates [affected you]?

**BO:** Oh, I don't remember anything about Denver. My family left when I was six months old. So I lived in Tucson for most of my youth. Lived in San Diego for a little bit of time when I was young in elementary school but primarily grew up in Tucson, Arizona.

And you know, the desert was always a really huge part of me and my reality, as was Latin culture because the language, the place, everything, it's really Mexico. It's not really the United States. And so I learned Spanish at a very early age because I was nosy and wanted to know what people were talking about. And then when I learned Spanish from people and I started taking classes as a kid, I started getting introduced to Latino culture in Tucson at a time when it was an extremely racist place. It still is, but then it was extremely racist. And so that kind of always offended me. My parents, my grandmother were Southern.

And I was told I couldn't go swimming in the public pools, and that didn't make any sense to me at all. It was 110 degrees. That was the stupidest thing I had ever heard. So it just kind of on an intimate level of—you know, why can't I go swimming? That's stupid! [*laughs*] You know? When I was a kid, these things kind of made an impression on me.

And then I left Tucson when I was seventeen and went to school at UC Davis and got really involved in organizing for the United Farm Workers' boycott of grapes and lettuce when I was in school there. And then I was a translator at D-Q University.

**CG:** All of these things that you've been telling me I think still to this day reflect your interests, but more than anything your curiosity. And that kind of curiosity, like, in a sense, you just don't eat things as they give them to you. If you are told something, you always were very skeptical about the specificities of why is it that these things that they're telling me is normal, is normal, when it's not?

And you took that not only into your schooling after UC Davis, which you graduated from [with] the highest honors in your Bachelor of Science. You then went into law. When you were organizing for *lechugeros*—which is such an important and essential aspect of a lot of the artists that then you ended up meeting later on and even during those times—what are some of the things that really motivated you to organize but also to try to understand how [you could] help them? What was the impetus for those things?

**BO:** Well, I dropped out of college, and I was [a] full-time organizer, a labor organizer, for about ten years, organizing attendant care workers and domestic workers trying to get better wages, better working conditions. I helped get AFSCME involved at UC Davis. I was the coordinator of Tom Hayden's campaign.

You know, I just always felt like creating social change was an important responsibility of any of us who are living and breathing the air on the planet, and gratitude for the things that working people create, and make, and bring to our tables. So I mean, I guess I've always—yes, curious, yes, not accepting authority or the usual story about the usual suspects. But also just feeling part of society and part of the planet and having a responsibility to be engaged.

**CG:** I think that the context that you have been in, living in, or even that you decided to partake in having formed your decisions throughout your life, as you have just noted, one of the interesting things that I've seen is when you graduated from your law school, you did start being recognized as a person to go to for these kinds of things that other people wouldn't [do].

What am I talking about? If I am a muralist, if I am a visual artist, and I have zero people in my life that know about intellectual property, copyright law, anything that deals with what it is that I need to know about my own work being respected, valued, and also not vandalized, or copied, you would be the person to go to. And you're very well known to this day as one of the people to go to.

What is it that makes you the person that these people go to? What is it from you that is, other than your credentials, but you as a person, what are the things that you say this of myself? I think this is why people like Susan Cervantes, Ester Hernández, all of these people have talked to you. What are the characteristics?

**BO:** I mean, I think it's because I'm committed to art as a medium of social change, and I get it as being part of a movement. So my great-grandmother was a professional artist. I've always loved art, and I'd always—going past the freeways, going through San Francisco—I'd always seen these murals. And I thought they were being done by magical people who would go out

and not commodify their artwork but would do these massive paintings on the walls that share this history and stories of organizing and social change with everybody.

So it really interested me, and I started going out and going to [the] Mission Cultural Center, where I met my wife. I started—one of my downstairs neighbors was a muralist, and she said people keep stealing the stuff. Is there anything I can do about it? And I said, yeah, there is. And that was when I was in law school. And I got a bunch of law students together to register the copyrights in murals and got a law firm to donate the money to pay for the registration fees for it. And we just went out and for free started doing this work to get the copyrights and the muralists registered. And so I guess I showed up and I was interested.

And when people would ask me to help, I give plain English, straightforward, clear legal advice. And when I take on a case, I usually win it. I've taken risks to win cases. The first federal visual artists' rights case that really was a big victory was my case, and it was about the *Lilli Ann* mural here in the Mission.

So it's an unusual niche, and I do it very well, and I'm respectful. And I learn from the people that I'm working with. I don't just try to apply one set of, you know, here's the law. "This is what you have to do," you know? Da, da, da. I'm not pompous.

**CG:** No. I think, if anything, the word respect and understanding the dignity of these artists as people, really comes to mind with you and your work. Because you just referred to one of the biggest cases of your career, which really set up a precedent legally, and the jurisdiction of the understanding, that a lot, a lot of the murals that exist in San Francisco are just right outside these doors.

**BO:** That's right. You know, here in San Francisco in a small geographical area, the murals are highly visible. There's lots of murals, and they're highly visible because they're all right here.

**CG:** The density.

**BO:** Yeah, the density.

**CG:** It's the density. And it's really fascinating that you talk about your practice as very straightforward and you're just going to give them the answers in English. And I feel like that's an important element of some of the clients that you've taken, including Acción Latina, as I was just mentioning, Ester Hernández, but also the Dolores Huerta Foundation.

These are all people that have been very important, not only in terms of just social and just like civic rights, just like the actual dignity and humanity of these people under the law in the

United States. They've also been people associated with these art movements. They were not separate. They were actually very interrelated, and I think you've understood that, as you were highlighting.

When you think of some of these artists, especially the ones that really taught future generations how to make this art and how to understand it, what are some of the first memories of working with some of these muralists, maybe especially in the Mission?

**BO:** Just to add to some of the list that you'd mentioned. I'm also the United Farm Workers [UFW] union intellectual property lawyer. So I protect "*Sí se puede*" and the black eagle [logo] from being stolen. So I don't know. You know, I think that I started going to events in the Mission. I started meeting people. People started calling me. And then because the graphics of the work are dramatic, I started getting a lot of press coverage too.

So *California Lawyer* magazine did a cover story on the work I was doing early on in my career. I went back to law school when I was thirty-six. I graduated when I was thirty-nine, and then I started my law practice straight out of law school. I didn't go to work for a big firm, so I had an opportunity to work with people in creative ways that I might not have had in big law.

Now I've made a career, and I'm famous enough th[at] big law wants me, and so I'm now associated with Procopio, which is a really fine law firm with lots of resources that they're making available to all of my clients too.

So you know—I don't know. I think that there's this overall sense of the Chicano movement in the United States. And *muralismo* is very directly connected to that movement for civil rights and social justice, labor rights. The union had lots of artists that were working with it—the UFW and lots of artists that were working with it. The Royal Chicano Air Force, an iconic mural arts organization of muralists out of Sacramento did all kinds of organizing with the UFW. I was in school at UC Davis during those times, and it became part of my life. The art and the history of the Chicano Movement are completely integrated, and it resonated with me as a kid from Tucson. But I'm not sure I'm answering your question.

**CG:** No, you are, and the interesting part of it is one thing that I have noticed with all of these conversations I've been having is either you all are very modest about what you did or the answers are just limited to the understanding that some others, like us, have of what do you did. I think that you're very modest about the significant steps you [took], and you did answer the question.

What is it of all of these different projects or different clients that you have that you remember the most in terms of the most important legal battles or distinctions? Because a lot of these terms came to be thanks to a lot of your work too or a lot of the actual jurisprudence—of understanding the legalese behind what is a mural, what isn't, and what is protected by the law.

A lot of your work, which is behind the scenes, let them have the possibility of continuing to express something that has this kind of social significance. What are some of those terms for some of these things that you, yourself, and other associates of yours, helped coin or helped really contribute to really solidifying a definition, or making sure that there's a protection under the law? What are some of those things?

**BO:** Well, we were among the first to even register the copyrights in murals and to be able to define whether a mural had been published for legal purposes or was unpublished, which allowed for the registration and protection of a lot of muralists' rights under the law. Because you get the copyrights whether or not you register them, but you can't file the lawsuit. You can't exercise those rights.

So we created the groundwork for the registration of murals as unpublished works giving the artists substantially more protection and legal rights than they had otherwise. I also am the foremost practitioner of the federal Visual Artists Rights Act and the California Art Preservation Act, and I have written about it, and spoken about it, and litigated it.

And we made a real change in how real estate developers and property owners deal with murals that are painted on their walls so that—because we litigated and won several of those cases. And it was really public. People started being a lot more cautious about whether they were going to just go out and paint over a mural because they would get sued if they did that.

And then we also worked with the City of San Francisco and other cities to create language that didn't require artists to fully waive all of their Visual Artists Rights Act [rights] because in response to some of that litigation, property owners and the city, and even now the [San Francisco] Art Commission—which is so wrong—actually tries to get artists to waive all their federal Visual Artists Rights Act [rights]. So those rights are about the protection of the original piece of artwork, not just reproduction rights, right? The reproduction stops people from making copies and selling them—that's an important bundle of rights—[or] using it in a film or using it in a Super Bowl commercial or those kinds of things.

Lots of the cases I've done you have never heard about because we settled in confidential settlements. But it made ripples that made people recognize that murals are works of fine art and protected under federal law.

And we also created a jurisprudence around the federal Visual Artists Rights Act and the California Art Preservation Act, and when each of them is appropriate to use. In fact, we just did a case, had a really successful resolution in a case, against Caltrans, [because] they painted over Judy Baca's iconic *Hitting the Wall* mural in downtown Los Angeles. And in a very unique settlement, we were able to get a resolution where they paid for that mural to be restored. And the layers of paint are just coming off of that beautiful woman athlete, beautiful woman runner, and she's coming out into the light of day again, just ahead of the Los Angeles Olympics.

**CG:** That is just so important. On Friday, I was talking to Amalia Mesa-Bains and just the significance of Judy Baca. Not only for art history, but also just her significance in terms of just the social contribution of her art. I'm very happy to see the real application of your litigation and also just of your clients being represented in the way you have. Because I feel like a lot of the people, including myself, just as Latinos in the United States—unless you practice law, unless you have a lawyer in your family, there's not a lot of people that back in those days, especially seventies and eighties, knew about what was protected or even the distinctions of what fine art could be under the eyes of the law.

And you've made it possible to be respected. You've made it possible to also just be honoring the legacies of a lot of these artists. When you think of some of the artists that either have been clients of yours—of course, you cannot talk about a lot of different things, but even if it's not clients, but friends, people that you've come to [know] closely.

What are some of these areas that have still some of the murals painted in Balmy Alley, or around here in the minipark, that you still have fond memories of or things that you would like to remember about that and you? What are some of those stories?

**BO:** Wow, just about all of them. Most of the muralists have been clients and friends, you know? I mean, even Judy Baca in LA, we're really close friends in addition to her being a client. And so, you know, I had great times with Judy, getting a chance to have her give me a personal tour of *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* on the Tujunga Wash, a half-mile-long mural. And then to be with her for the first time that she went to the retrospective of her work last weekend at the Museum of Latin American Art. And they did a completely immersive experience of *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*.



And we sat in there as the [immersive video showed t]hat Tujunga [Flood Control Channel] just ripping through the desert, you know, through the land, and then became a built [landscape], and then [showed] the painting of the mural, and all of the kids that worked with her, hundreds of gangbangers and kids and people who didn't have anything to rely on. And they went down into that wash and worked, and worked, and worked, and created this magnificent piece of art.

And then to see that whole thing going in motion, the sketches, and then being colorized, and then in motion around four walls of a major museum, when Chicana artists just have never had a retrospective like that anywhere—we were all in tears. You know, so to go from walking the actual mural with her to being present the first time she saw it displayed in that way was profoundly moving. It was really exciting.

You know, just being able to go out—and with mural after mural—being able to go out with conservators and the muralists themselves when a mural has been painted over, and to show that that mural can be uncovered and revealed to the light of day again, even when somebody has disrespected it so much as to paint over it. Like, why would you? You know, nobody would go into a house and paint over a painting hanging on their wall. Why would you think it's OK to do that on a giant painting that somebody spent months working on with their little paint brushes, you know? I mean, Susan Cervantes—and Ester has taken me into her studio, and showed me her prints, and talked about her art process.

I mean, I've had an opportunity to be right there with people while they're painting and while they're creating their work, while they're making the designs, while they're explaining how they've made changes.

You know, Irene and the Women's Building muralists, you know? We started a really—they managed to create a partnership that has lasted to license and create a book and to continue to give that mural life. And we worked out an arrangement with the Women's Building so that when they needed to make changes to the building, the muralists were brought back in to restore it as an integral part of remodeling a building.

So to create that kind of collaboration and dance between building owners and artists that allows these works of art to live on in somewhat new forms—and, I mean, it's been really fun. I mean, it's been great, you know? Like, most lawyers spend their time going to bar association meetings or hanging out with lawyers, and I was like, Oh, my God. You know, I can go hang out with the artists and creative people and learn about their creative process and what their work represents and how it changes. So I mean, I've had that kind of experience with almost all of the muralists. I go out to the walls, and I watch when they're painting.

**CG:** You have had such a first-person perspective as a lawyer but as well as a human witnessing and being able to document memories of what these walls have meant throughout the years, decades. And when I hear your stories currently, one of the things that really is interesting and fascinating to me is a lot of the moments in which these artists feel the most, I would say, violated—because it is a violation of their own work, when these kinds of things happen, [and] they happen very often.

Like I've heard it from Juana Alicia, from Susan, from most of the Mujeres Muralistas, of people just coming and tagging or just like ripping [out] parts of some of these more elaborate murals. And the care and the work that they need to put in to kind of restore it, and being able to restore it, as you were saying—do you have any of the stories of something you might have witnessed or of a story of a friend whose mural was obliterated in this way? Is there any story that jumps to mind?

**BO:** I have to be very, very careful because pretty much most of what I do is privileged and confidential. So part of that is a professional obligation. But part of it also is the way in which I have kept people's trust. Even though I'm working with lots of people who run in the same circles that are close with one another, when people talk to me or show me things or do things with me, I don't gossip about it. *No chisme*.

So, for example, that settlement about *Hitting the Wall*—that's not confidential, so I can talk about that. And there's a lot going on in the press right now where you can find a lot of the images and with Facebook that is showing that work being restored. So that's the reason I'm talking about that one in addition to it being really current.

Some of the ones where I've litigated, you know, filed a lawsuit, those too, those cases are public, but their resolutions might be private. So I think I don't want to tell tales about the people I know.

**CG:** Yeah, no, I understand. The fascinating parts of—

**BO:** I mean, I can tell you like my wife is a muralist. You know I met my wife here in Balmy Alley. And then she was doing a mural on her—Elba Rivera, she was doing a mural on her elementary school over at what's now Cesar Chavez School. It used to be Hawthorne when she went to elementary school there. And you know, I met her at Mission Cultural Center, and I met Susan Cervantes that same night, and a lot of the other artists that same night.

I didn't become a lawyer until 1994, so I wasn't doing it in the seventies or eighties, and this federal Visual Artists Rights Act Law wasn't passed and didn't become effective until June

1991. So there was no case law on it when I first became a lawyer. That's why I made the case law. And so I've been in Balmy Alley all the time, you know?

She was painting a mural right across the street from the alley, Elba was, and I thought she was hot so I was hanging out while she was painting. And I guess she felt the same way, and the people that lived here wanted to sell the property, and they thought it was a terrible neighborhood. You know, the projects were down there. It was pretty crazy. And I said, "Well, we'll take it off your hands." Yeah, it's terrible, but, OK. And so we were able to buy this property really inexpensively. And because of that, I've been able to do a lot of this work at a discounted rate too. So I don't know—what can I tell you?

**CG:** The first thing that I really appreciate from you is we're having to navigate several different things, not only in terms of professional privilege but also in terms of personal privilege. And those are very important things that I feel are very important to maintain. *No chisme* here. There's no, I think, chisme.

It's more there's so many memories that rest in each one of the people, including yourself, that I'm talking to—one of the things, for example, is just, as you just said, you met your wife in Balmy. She was painting here, and that is fascinating. That's a beautiful story. If anything, I want to ask you about that. And after that, I would love to ask you a little bit about your specific social stance on LGBTQ+ rights because that has been a big part of your not only work but, in a sense, advocacy. Like you've done a lot for yourself and others in this way too.

So let me start with the first one, which is the beautiful story that you more or less hinted at, just your wife was painting a mural in Balmy Alley. And how did you two just meet and continue to create this legacy that you've also both created? How did that happen?

**BO:** Well, remember I told you there was a muralist who lived downstairs from me. I was living up in Bernal Hill. Her name is Patricia Rose, and she's the docent at Precita Eyes. And so she said, "Is there anything we can do about this?" And I said yes. And she says, "Well, come with me to the Mission Cultural Center. There's an opening. I want you to meet a lot of people." So we went to this opening at Mission Cultural Center—I guess twenty-seven years ago now, twenty-six, twenty-seven years ago.

And Elba Rivera, my wife, my now wife, that was when I first met her. So I met Elba and Susan Cervantes and Ester Hernández, and like a dozen other of the great muralists, Irene [Pérez], and Lorraine Garcia-Nakata and a lot of other people right there, right then, that night. And my life changed.

So that's when I started—and I told Precita Eyes it's like I'll register the copyrights [for many of the murals] if you let me do all the licensing and infringement work for you. And she said, "OK, whatever," you know? So we started doing that.

So Elba and I—Elba and I met there, and then there was a Precita Eyes youth mural arts event in Precita Park that they hold every single year. And I was there, and I went to see what that was about. And Elba was there, and she had a little chihuahua at that time. And that little chihuahua, it was one of these San Francisco summer days that Mark Twain talks about being the coldest winter you ever experienced. And so that little chihuahua was just suffering. She was so cold, so I picked her up and I put her in my jacket right here, right? And the chihuahua's all happy, and Elba looks at me. She got so fresh. She said, "I wish I could be there." And I was like, "Oh, matter of fact, [*laughs*] so do I." So then we started dating, and the rest is history. We've been together for twenty-five years.

And yeah, when I was in law school, I was the editor in chief of the law review, and I wrote an article about all of the laws that protected straight people's marriages. There were three thousand different statutes that protect straight people's marriages. And as LGBTQ and trans folks, we were not allowed to marry at that time, so I felt really strongly about LGBTQ civil rights as well as racial justice issues.

My daughter's half black, and we ran into a lot of prejudice in a small town that we lived in up in the mountains of the Sierras. And it was real ugly stuff, so I wanted to do racial justice and LGBTQ stuff. And then I met Elba and Patricia, and all these other artists, and I was like, Well, I can do art too. That's incredible, you know?

Because people tell you, you know—they tell people not to be artists because you can't make a living, and they tell lawyers not to do art law because you can't make a living. But anything that you take a risk at, there's going to be some reward for it, right? So people were willing to take a risk on me early in my legal career partly because I was a grown-up person, you know? Like I said, I was nearly forty, and I had a lot of—I'd been an organizer. I'd been in business. You know, I had all that. I wasn't like a young lawyer who didn't even know what insurance was, right? So I could bring all of that life experience and apply the law to it.

So Elba was really happy to work with me. She came in and became the bookkeeper because she was really good at numbers. So it was a little bit of a mom-and-mom business for a long time. She retired about four years ago.

So, you know, I mean—and she's a muralist and an artist, and it became our life. And then I got real involved. I was general counsel for San Francisco Pride. I am the lawyer for the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. They sainted me. I'm Saint Brooke of the Patent Leather

Legal Briefs, which is a huge honor. And I've done a lot of advocacy that I've been recognized for kindly.

And then I think probably my most famous case is the Dykes on Bikes trademark, where I went all the way to the US Supreme Court twice because the trademark office was rejecting that as a trademark and saying it was derogatory to lesbians. And I was like, "Wait, let me explain." [laughs] We've recategorized that from an epithet to a symbol of pride as women ride down Market Street rumbling their motorcycles, making the walls shake. Dykes on Bikes is a matter of pride. We've recaptured that.

And they're like, "No. I found this thing in a 1915 Webster's dictionary that says it's derogatory." "It's not even in print anymore. What are you talking about? Here's a two-foot stack of evidence." And they were not persuaded. And so we had to go all the way to the US Supreme Court, and then we had to go back again more recently. And finally, the law that allowed the US Patent and Trademark Office to decide for others what's derogatory and what isn't was found to be unconstitutional.

**CG:** You have had such a storied career, not only in law, but also organizing, as you were saying, in business. One of the most important things that I think sometimes has been the case is that people separate themselves as a subject [from other] aspects of their lives, especially professional, that also touch upon those subjectivities, those identities. You, of all people, knew exactly what you were talking about because it affected people like you, right?

**BO:** Yep.

**CG:** And queer people, just people part of this community, know what it is that they're doing to reclaim certain things. And the beauty of this example is also the fact that you were really making sure that they understand that the language and the use of these expressions has changed throughout time too.

**BO:** That's right.

**CG:** And they will continue to change throughout time because it's about who uses the words and how they get used. And it's just a beautiful part of also what you've done throughout the legacy of a lot of these other art forms too. And a lot of your friends too are part of the community, people like Irene Pérez. Just the fact that you all knew each other, and the fact that you all also shared certain identities, I think maybe helped each other, right? Just as humans, not only in business, not only in terms of making sure that these things are protected as they should because they are—it just feels like you all created a community of support that still to this day keeps going on strong.

And one of the things that I feel seems to be or have happened is that because of gentrification—because of so many different things that have happened to San Francisco and that have happened around the world too—a lot of these people do not live in the Mission anymore if they did. You're one of the few, with Elba.

How have you seen that change personally, and how has that affected some of your friends and yourself?

**BO:** Well, yes, a lot of the artists have moved out of the city. And that started happening not just recently, but with the first tech bubble in the nineties. And so, I mean—it's really affected us. But people still come back for events, right? People come back to Balmy Alley. People come back. Galería de la Raza has been a really central gathering place in the events that it holds.

You know, I've done legal work for them, for the Chicana Latina Foundation, which has been really instrumental in promoting the success of Latinas in the world. So there are some nonprofit organizations that really hold the fabric of the community together in their hands.

With COVID, of course, that changed it even more significantly because we couldn't see each other. You couldn't hug, you know? You don't have the—you're not seeing people in three dimensions anymore. But we did learn how to stay in touch through Zoom and through other things. There have been the folks who don't love technology as an intermediary[who have] grown further apart, and that's been sad. And to be honest, Elba and I are spending a lot of our time outside the city.

We have forty-seven acres out in the foothills of the Sierras south of Yosemite that we'd been going out to like just every couple of months and camping. But when COVID hit, we just moved out there. And we've been building a place, and so we're spending a lot of our time out there.

Elba's lived in the Mission since 1959, and she's a little bit over it. It's really not the same as it was ten years ago, you know? I mean, we had like a super-strong community, and it was really working class here. And a lot of the working-class people have really had trouble hanging on and have left. I mean, right here on Balmy Alley, there's a bunch of working-class people that still live here, and we speak Spanish and hang out together. But we're not even spending as much time in the city. It's just hard. It's hard to be here.

And you know, when COVID hit, there's so many people who depend on me. If I'd gone down, it would have really impacted a lot of people. So I had to do everything I could to protect

myself. And then, of course, the first event I get to in eighteen months, I catch a cold. So annoying. And it didn't really matter if we were here or if we were four hours away because you couldn't see each other anyway, you know? And we got used to getting up with a cup of coffee and going out and listening to the birds instead of listening to the drunks going by. It's kind of nice.

**CG:** Yeah, you just highlighted all of the many changes that have happened, especially in the nineties, as you said, as that's when you became a lawyer. That's exactly when a lot of the tech boom—the first one, the big one—happened. And the good thing—what I hear is that while the community is no longer so concentrated in this area, the community still exists, even if it has to be somewhere else or it just has different like nexus or different points of convergence.

And one thing that I've heard from you is the essence of why nonprofits sometimes have been so important for these kinds of things. And in the interest of time, I only have two more questions. One of them is about Calle 24 and the Latino Cultural District, because I think that that has been also one of the most essential parts for what Balmy became. What are your memories of that time when you helped cofound this?

**BO:** You did your research, huh? Yeah, so that was one of the things that a lot of the *veteranos* and *veteranas* living here decided to do to protect the neighborhood from gentrification. We saw what was happening on Valencia Street—the combination of storefronts, the evictions of longtime business owners, the turning it into just like a nightclub strip of fancy restaurants and dance clubs for the texters and techies, and then the big buses coming in, the Google and Facebook buses, these faceless white buses rolling through the neighborhood, huge.

And, you know, that they were white wasn't lost on any of us, as it really felt like the conquistadors coming in. I mean, it was really bad. And so David Campos and Hillary Ronen, who's the supervisor now, Erick Arguello, some other really key activists here, John Mendoza, Miguel Bustos, [Martha Sanchez], we started working to create legislation that would create a Latino cultural district. That wouldn't just [be] like Olvera Street [in Los Angeles], which is cultural tourism, but that would support, you know, stores—and not just gift shops, but stores where people can get masa, where people can get the spices that go in the food that they're traditionally used to eating. And new restaurants would have to have menu items that are affordable to families. And stopping storefronts from being combined into bigger storefronts to try to keep the businesses that serve the Latinx community, the working people in the Latinx community, in place. So what that did—so we passed that legislation. And then we set up a nonprofit to essentially govern that.

And we worked really hard to come up with bylaws that would reflect the values of maintaining long-term residents. And so then those, but I wrote those bylaws in consultation with people, and then those became models for the other cultural districts that have since been set up in San Francisco—how you can structure the constitution of an organization to reflect the values, and to get the leadership that’s going to maintain those values. So I did that.

We all worked really hard on making those thoughtful[ly] structured [in] ways that would mean the new residents—gentrifiers—couldn’t come in and take over the organization and just vote out Indigenous leadership. So that was a big part of what we did there. It was really fun, and it’s worked.

**CG:** It has worked, and these are some of the ripples that we’ve been talking about in this conversation. Even sometimes, as you were saying, you might not be able to disclose certain things just because that’s the nature of your work. These are some of the also larger effects of what you’ve done with other people as well.

One last question, which is just a more personal question. And you can [decide] whether you want to [answer it]. I’ve been asking this just because oral histories are such a beautiful vehicle to understand people and to understand their place in places, right? What they did, what motivated them. I could ask you, how would you like to remember the Mission, or like how would you like the legacy of some other things—like when you worked with the Cesar Chavez Foundation or other things. I could ask you about those things. I want to ask you, personally, yourself, how would you like yourself and your work to be remembered?

**BO:** I’d like to be remembered as a cultural justice warrior, that I’m a fighter with integrity and values, connected to artists, and connected to both the LGBTQ community and connected to the Mission community [in the] really long term—that it’s integrated into my life and my work. And that I’m very honored to be trusted by as many people as I am—I endeavor to earn that trust every single day.

**CG:** I think one thing that I, from this conversation, from just getting to know you before even this conversation happened—one of the things that you mentioned today that really, really stuck with me is that you have to take a risk. And most of the time, that risk, in one way or another, will reap a reward. Sometimes the rewards might just be the end in itself, which might be just a human relationship that lasts for a long time.

And while a lot of these people have trusted you, I think you’ve also trusted them, and you’ve also put yourself there, and the community is better for it. So, Brooke, just thank you so much for just having this time to just reminisce, talk about so many memories. It’s been a



true honor to just be able to even pick your brain and to understand you as a person. Thank you so much.

**BO:** Thank you. Thanks very much. When you're running through your life doing what you do, you don't often have an opportunity to sit and reflect like this, and I really appreciate the chance to do so. Thank you.

**CG:** Thank you.

After we finished the oral history, I was greeted by Elba Rivera, the Salvadoran-born artist who Brooke later married on a pirate ship in San Francisco. Brooke was about to enter a meeting, but before she did she was gracious enough to show me around her office and show me some of the keepsakes, art, and photographs she has been collecting throughout her career. Here is an audio record of that tour:

**CG:** What are some of the things that we have around us that you would like to tell me about?

**BO:** Well, let's see. There's my sainthood from the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. I'm Saint Brooke of the Patent Leather Legal Briefs. The sisters do this really nice thing of honoring activists who've helped the queer community. And then you're always called Saint Brooke or something. It's pretty neat.

**CG:** Defender of Rights and Keeper of the Marks?

**BO:** That's right. This is a picture of Ester Hernández and Dolores Huerta at my twenty-fifth business anniversary. We had a big party and did a benefit for Emilio Huerta's campaign for the board of supervisors. This is me and Dolores at Che Guevara's family home in Havana. And we went to Cuba together, and then I was asked to come consult with Che's *familia*.

So this is his widow and their family lawyer, and they were cautious about who was going to come, but I said I had to have a translator. So Dolores came as my translator, and that was an amazing moment.

**CG:** Sorry, what?

**BO:** Dolores came as my translator.

**CG:** Are you kidding me? Dolores Huerta is your translator at Che Guevara's wife's home?

**BO:** Yes.

**CG:** Are you kidding?

**BO:** I'm not kidding.

**CG:** OK. All right.

**BO:** That was pretty fine, right?

**CG:** Oh, that's incredible, yeah. You got also some anime, and you also have these beautiful pieces of art. What are those two pieces?

**BO:** Well, the anime—I'm the lawyer for the largest anime convention in North America, and their board president came in and said, "You don't have any anime art! What's wrong with you?" So I got this huge piece of anime art. I said, "All right, are we done?" But I like it because it's got a woman warrior there. She's got a big sword. You know, she's fighting for justice in that piece, so that's all good.

This one is a painting by my wife, Elba Rivera, and it's a flamenco dancer, but it's a flamenco dancer who's wearing pants. So that was remarkable, and so I have that here in my office.

And then we got to go to visit a client whose studio was in Spain—you could see the Rock of Gibraltar from his studio. That's his work, Michael Parkes. And he and his wife took us to Seville to see real flamenco dancers, so we have that here.

Yeah, and then we have—this is my great-grandmother's work. She was a professional artist in the twenties and thirties and still has work in the St. Augustine Museum of Art. She founded the St. Augustine —

**CG:** Florida?

**BO:** Yeah.

**CG:** For real? So I probably have watched. Oh, wow, that's so cool.

After we finished the tour of her office, I went to the conference room to pack up my gear and noticed the many *alebrijes* and art law books that she had in there. And after I finished packing up my gear, I went outside the room and heard the fountain in Elba's and Brooke's home right next to the 50 Balmy Law office before I left to venture into Balmy Alley from having talked to one of its most staunch defenders and experts. [*water running*]

This oral history of Brooke Oliver was a collaborative effort, like murals also are. The team behind it was:

**ERICA GANGSEI:** Erica Gangsei

**MYISA PLANCQ-GRAHAM:** Myisa Plancq-Graham

**CG:** Who served as executive producers.

**NATALIA DE LA ROSA:** Natalia de la Rosa

**CG:** Who served as a production assistant.

The rest of the team included:

**JAVIER BRIONES:** Javier Briones

**KEVIN CARR:** Kevin Carr

**CHAD COERVER:** Chad Coerver

**CARY CORDOVA:** Cary Cordova

**STEPHANIE GARCÉS:** Stephanie Garcés

**MELISSA SAN MIGUEL:** Melissa San Miguel

**CG:** And it was produced and mixed by me, Camilo Garzón.

The *Mission Murals Project* was organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services.

Thanks for listening.