

**PROYECTO MISSION MURALS**  
Oral History Audio Transcripts

**MIA GALAVIZ DE GONZALEZ AND ANA  
MONTANO ORAL HISTORY**  
San Francisco, June 24, 2021

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This is an oral history of arts educator Mia Gonzalez and lawyer Ana Montano for the *Mission Murals Project*. I'm Camilo Garzón. It was recorded on the morning of June 24, 2021, inside of Radio Habana Social Club in the Mission District of San Francisco, California.

Once you start listening to the oral history, you'll hear descriptions of pieces of art, keepsakes, and artifacts that are part of the walls of the establishment and add to the texture of the place. The voices you'll hear will be those of Mia, Ana, producer Myisa Plancq-Graham, and me.

This oral history delves into the facets of Mia's and Ana's early life, their upbringing, and how they ended up meeting and becoming roommates in San Francisco's Mission District. The personal and political reasons for their focus on establishing Balmy Alley as an arts space are clarified, [and] they share their experiences reclaiming space for community, education, and activism. This oral history is a beautiful testament to the role of friendship, partnership, and collaboration in revolution, [and it] highlights both Mia Gonzalez's and Ana Montano's respective roles in preserving and amplifying Chicanx and Latinx heritage in San Francisco's Mission District and beyond.

Here is the oral history.

*Esta es una historia oral de la docente de arte Mia Gonzalez y de la abogada Ana Montano para el Mission Murals Project. Soy Camilo Garzón. Se grabó la mañana del 24 de junio de 2021, dentro del Radio Habana Social Club en el barrio de la Mission de San Francisco (California).*

*Una vez que comiences a escuchar la historia oral, oirás descripciones de obras de arte, de artículos de recuerdo y de artefactos que son parte de las paredes del establecimiento y que contribuyen a la textura del lugar. Las voces que oirás serán las de Mia, Ana, la productora Myisa Plancq-Graham y la mía. Esta historia oral ahonda en las facetas de las primeras etapas de las vidas de Mia y Ana, su crianza y cómo llegaron a conocerse y ser compañeras de piso en el barrio de la Mission de San Francisco. Llegan a aclarar las razones personales y políticas de su enfoque en establecer Balmy Alley como un espacio de arte, y comparten sus experiencias sobre reclamar espacio para la comunidad, la educación y el activismo.*

*Esta historia oral es un testimonio hermoso del papel que juegan la amistad, la alianza y la colaboración en la revolución, y destaca los papeles respectivos de Mia Gonzalez y de Ana Montano en conservar y divulgar la herencia chicanxay latinxa en la Mission San Francisco y más allá. Aquí está la historia oral.*

**CAMILO GARZÓN:** And I'm recording now. Today is June 24, and I'm here with Mia Gonzalez, and I am also here with Ana Montano, talking to them on behalf of the *Mission Murals Project*. And we're talking to them in a very special place. Do you mind, both of you, describing where you are? [Either] of you can start.

**MIA GALAVIZ DE GONZALEZ:** We're in a wonderful little café place—bistro you would almost call [it]—called Radio Havana. It started with Victor Navarrete, who's a Cuban artist, and his wife, Leila Mansur.

And Victor had been active with the community and his art—and he's more of a sculptor. So the walls are very reflective of his mind, in many ways, and his creativity. And one of the back walls he also leaves open for other artists to show their work.

**ANA MONTANO:** And it's always changing, right?

**MG:** Yeah.

**AM:** Always evolving.

**CG:** Always evolving. And before we get into the kind of interesting thing that you just mentioned, which relates very much to murals, which are like ever-changing pieces of art that get contributed to and keep changing, what are some of the things that we're looking at right now?

**AM:** Well, they're mixed-media sculptures, right? They have like a Surrealist/Dada influence because he mixes different media in very interesting ways and even hangs it very interesting. But he also has these assemblage boxes. For instance, I reacted to this one—[this] John Lennon one—because it really captures the time and actually the feeling of when John Lennon was shot. So when I saw the box, I was kind of taken aback—oh.

So they're—some of them are more light-hearted, musicians. He's got a photograph in here of Marilyn Monroe, artists, musicians. But then—and then others that you're not so sure what they're saying. There's toys, for example, dolls, clowns. He's got one of Frida, which is beautiful too. I love the way he used that gold with the image, which is, I think, a commercial image. Then he's got van Gogh way up there—after, I think, he cut his ear.

**MG:** But he put in that little mirror box too.

**CG:** And I think I see the ear.

**MG:** Yeah, he put it in there. With the assemblage part.

**AM:** And then below that we have Picasso, with the bike—with the bike, but it—see? The bike. We call it handles that look like a bull. Which I think is—one of the Dada artists did that. And then Victor put it together in such a strong graphic way.

**CG:** Yeah, like a bull.

**AM:** Yeah. Yeah.

**CG:** Of Pamplona.

**AM:** I don't know that might be by—I don't know—maybe by Duchamp, actually. But I just love the way it's reproduced here, right? It really brings everything to it. And the photograph, of course. Pablo Picasso was—he was very photogenic, I would say.

And then the Campbell's soup, right, by Andy. So it's just, I mean you could sit here for, I think—I mean, it's a museum space, almost. You could sit there looking at this artwork for hours.

**MG:** It's very bohemian.

**CG:** Yeah. And there's Hitchcock, James Baldwin, Borges, Gandhi, Tchaikovsky.

**MG:** Right.

**CG:** We have here Santana.

**AM:** Buster, what's the—

**MG:** Keaton? Yeah, yeah. Buster Keaton.

**AM:** Yeah. Buster Keaton.

**CG:** As well. Chekhov. Some of the Russians too. So it's very eclectic, to be honest.

**MG:** It's extremely, extremely eclectic.

**CG:** It's such a beautiful place. Thank you for describing the place for everyone listening. And I would say that the best way of starting here is with each one of your names. So we can go—let's say first with Mia and then with Ana. Like, say your full name as you want to say it, because sometimes even myself, like, Camilo Garzón, but I happen to also have other last names.

And because of the US spectrum of experiences or things we have gotten used to, sometimes we choose to not accentuate things or emphasize certain things. So with that in mind, Mia, do you mind beginning? Tell me your full name and where were you born and then we'll go with Ana.

**MG:** Sure. My name is Mia Galaviz, actually, and I'm a native San Franciscan. I'm a second-generation San Franciscan. Gonzalez is my married name. I've been trying to not have Gonzalez anymore, but it's very difficult to change your last name after you're married. You have to go through a lot of hurdles, so I just go, Galaviz de Gonzalez. So I maintained that name for a very, very, very long time.

**CG:** Thank you for sharing that. Ana?

**AM:** *Sí, yo me llamo* Ana Margarita Montano Herrera Morales. Let's see—I was born in El Salvador. But I immigrated with my mother back in the late fifties when she came. She was quite a pioneer. My cousin used to call her the Christopher Columbus of the family. Because she came to California, she didn't know anyone, and she was telling me, she says, "I don't know what I thought I was going to do as soon as I arrived." She didn't know anyone; she didn't have a place to stay. She actually met a friend at the airport when she was leaving El Salvador. And my aunt said to the friend, "Would you please take care of my niece?"

So that's the way my mom got established, and she actually moved into [a place on] 24th Street. And so we go right to 24th Street, back in the day. And I worked with Mia when I was a young college student at San Francisco City College. And it was the work-study program, that sent me to work at the center where she was the executive director of the Latino children's tutoring program. And they were young children—first grade through, what, six, seven, eight, maybe?

**MG:** Yeah, pretty much middle school.

**AM:** Yeah. So it was an education program. But Mia, being the artist that she is, always incorporated art into the children's education and tutorial experience. She really made a

great effort to expand their perspective. I remember that she was trying to get me to go with her on a camping trip with the kids. I didn't want to go with all these crazy little kids.

**MG:** It'll be better for you.

**AM:** Mia was used to that; she really just went that extra step. And she would take the kids camping at—what was it? San Gregorio on the coast of California.

**MG:** Yeah, that was one of them.

**AM:** And these kids are from [the] inner city, right? But that was her mindset at the time. And, of course, we did a lot of work and we went on to our careers and what have you.

**CG:** When you think of [this] kind of meeting, right, like meeting each other and also the work, I also want you to reflect back on something that I think we don't get asked about as much, which is just our family background, our upbringing, and all of these decisions of you—and being either, as we call it, native to the Mission, but if anything, like we became part of a place. We own some kind of identity now, thanks to having been in a place.

How do you think that kind of background influenced those further decisions and work that you did, specifically with children, which we'll get into as well as Balmy Alley? But what's the family background? And what are some things that you remember hearing of your parents, if you had siblings, and those kinds of things that you want to say?

**MG:** Well, for me, being a second-generation San Franciscan—and my grandmother who came, she was the one and only daughter [with] seven brothers. So she lived in the state of Chihuahua in Mexico and her family wanted to marry her off to a very wealthy land baron. And she just wasn't going to have that because, she says, "I'm too young, and he's too old—and I'm not going to do that."

So she [and] a girlfriend of hers escaped. And they hopped on a train, which Ana and I have done too. But it's a different story, a different time. And they jumped on a train and left for Chihuahua to come to California—same reason.

My grandmother had a brother in Los Angeles somewhere. And she went to Los Angeles, [and] then she came to San Francisco. Unfortunately for me, trying to get my family history—my family were at a point in their lives where they didn't really want to talk about how they left, how she got from LA to San Francisco.

But my grandmother never spoke English; she only spoke Spanish. And she, like many immigrant women, tried to look for a place to live and a place to work. So my grandmother was more of—she worked as a seamstress. She did get married and then she had her daughters. She had four daughters. And she lived here; they lived here in what's called the—'cause it was a more Mexican community in many ways, which is now called SoMa, South of Market.

So that was a very large community of Mexicans, actually, and they lived under what's now one of the ginormous pillars on Clementina Street, where the big pillars are when they established the big bridge. They loved where they lived, but they had to move, so they were forced, evicted [from], that area, and they found another place, again, part of the South of Market. South of Market had a lot of Mexicans; it was very Latino in that area. So that's where my mother grew up and met my dad down the street.

**AM:** Now [what] you said about the Mexican community in the South Market—which I really didn't know because I think [when] my mother came in the late fifties, that may have dissipated. But I remember that there was one Mexican shop on Market and Sixth? Sixth and Market. It was there for years, and they were the only shop that had Mexican goods like jewelry, clothing. But I think that was it; that was the only one until the Mexican Museum, I think. And Galería [de la Raza.]

**MG:** And Galería. Yeah, it was a different time.

**AM:** Yeah, but interesting. I hadn't put those together.

**MG:** So my family, my uncle had a shop here on 24th Street. We cannot leave—

**AM:** We can't get off 24th Street. [*laughs*]

**MG:** We can't get off 24th Street. For some reason, it's like 24th and 20th are our destination paths. It's bizarre to me,—but I know exactly where I was conceived because my uncle and my aunt lived with my mother and my father. And it was right across—it was on 20th and York, right across, around the corner from where we lived.

**AM:** Oh, where we used to live.

**MG:** We lived on 20th between York and Bryant.

**AM:** Yeah, we were roommates back in the day.

**MG:** Back in the day. And, but my—what was it, why was I going to 24th Street?

**AM:** Which is where we took these photographs.

**MG:** That's right, that's right. And why was I going to 24th Street at that point?

**AM:** Well, you said your uncle had a shop.

**MG:** Oh, yeah. Thank you. Oh, it's my aging. My Uncle Jack had a shop; he was a painter, but he was a sign painter. So he had a shop on 24th.

**AM:** [Brocha gorda] House painter.

**MG:** Yeah, on 24th near Mission, which is now La Bohème, the coffeehouse there. When you look inside the coffeehouse, you look because it's huge. You can see what was a divisional—a wall that was divided. He lived on the other side of that.

So he actually lived there, and he painted his signs. It was Jack Cabillo's Sign Painting. So a number of our family members were—they painted and they doodled, but they never really made it [or] looked at it as anything that was really particularly important—except for one of the uncles who lived in Tijuana. And he would paint huge murals in bars because he liked to have his refreshments.

**AM:** While he was painting.

**MG:** While he was painting. So then he also painted a huge mural by a bullring. And then he lived not far from that either. He was the only one who probably would have made it more exciting and interesting.

**AM:** You know when I remember, Mia? Your mother was a seamstress and she was very good. I remember she made some blouses for me. Then I remember she made that Chinese-style jacket one time and then you gave it to me. And it was such a fabulous jacket.

**MG:** That's funny; I was going to wear a Chinese jacket today. [*laughs*]

**AM:** And then, of course, you're so good at most of what you do. So that kind of artistic, I think—

**MG:** Bent, somewhat.



**AM:** Yeah, just kind of goes through the generations. He was a great artist though, right?

**MG:** I like to—I think what—about family in terms of sense of painting or drawing or being creative with the sewing machine, it just was a part of what you did. It was part of any kind of frontiers people, really. You sew and you make things for your family, for a variety of reasons. One, there's not a lot of money. And two, there's probably a lot—too many other people in the household. So you make do.

Because what we used to do—how I learned how to embroider was going with my mother to get the flour sacks and wash them. And there was still lettering on the flour sacks. We learned how to bleach them out and then we had to learn how to embroider. There's a wonderful print by [*cross talk*] [Ester Hernández.]

**AM:** So instead of sitting on—instead it's a little girl. She [Ester Hernández] might be two years old in that photo, in that—it's not a photo. It's a screenprint that she created. It shows her as a little girl sitting on a bunch of flour sacks. And she was saying that they would put [her]—her sisters, older sisters—would put her on the flour sacks and then they would look to see which flour sack would make a cute dress for her.

**MG:** And she has this dress, because one of her iconic images is a watermelon. So when she brought—she showed her [that] print, [to show us], when we used to work together, the print. And it was—Ana just started crying because it touched that spot of knowing what it means to use a flour sack for clothing.

**AM:** And with that aesthetic, that vibrant kind of aesthetic and that creativity. And, of course, obviously she was loved because her sisters, her family, bothered to say, “Hey, let's get the prettiest flour sack.”

**MG:** And the cutest child.

**AM:** Put it in a little dress.

**MG:** She actually gifted me that one [print]. So I have it now; I will give it to my daughter, and it's so sentimental. So I have to remind my grandson about that story; he doesn't know anything of that stuff at all

**AM:** Well, the other thing too is—so when I was here at school, here at Horace Mann. When I was in middle school, we used to call it middle school. And then we had homemaking. So we would be taught—we had a teacher. We were taught how to make pancakes, for example—you know, like really basic things.

And then we had other—of course, boys had [wood] shop or whatever. And then when I went to high school, which was actually a Catholic high school, we learned how to sew. And when my cousins who are, I'd say, almost a generation younger than I am, all that got taken away. The homemaking got taken away, the shop got taken away, the music got taken away. It was tragic.

**MG:** And dance.

**AM:** Yeah, anything that wasn't reading, writing, math was taken away from them.

**MG:** Anything to do with creativity and enrichment for a child was completely eliminated. And I think that was—

**AM:** And parents couldn't afford to—I mean, yeah, if you're a middle class person, you send your kid to ballet or to gymnastics or whatever, right? But a lot of the [Latino] parents here in the community could not afford to do that. So I think it really was a great tragedy in terms of the education young people got, and maybe [is] still now too; it's fairly limited.

**MG:** Yeah, it really [is] that same problem. And I think for us, because we had that good fortune and it was part of just of a naturalness about how we were educated. Because we had all those things in our school, we had that in growing up, and then we also had it in our families. If it wasn't your direct parent, it was somebody else in your family who would say, "Ah, *mija*, you're not going to do this? Oh man."

**AM:** And sometimes you can learn just by observing people, you know? So what I think happened with that is that we had a way of approaching or looking at issues and, let's say, situations; there may be problems and kind of feeling that, well, this is something else that can be worked at, worked with.

I think it kind of opens up your mind to that creativity and to the fact that you actually have the ability to make things and make things move if you want to do that, if you feel you need to do that. So you have that open, kind of like that open mind, because you have these skills. So you have this certain confidence, I think. It creates a certain confidence. I think maybe that's less so with the younger people right now. I mean, with the technology that's a whole other issue, right?

**CG:** And if you think of technology—and that's something I wanted to even add. It's just that we weren't taught necessarily that all of these things, like understanding how to do the job

of a seamstress, how to do arts and crafts, all of those things involve technologies. They just happen to be other kinds of technologies that are not telecommunications-oriented or happen on the screen, right? But they use tools. And those tools have a purpose. And if anything, they can exalt ourselves and others, and also our cultures.

So it's very beautiful to just see how you both are remembering these times and even these kinds of very special things that you learned then [and] it seems you also applied later on in life, in your professional career. But it's these little things from you in your Salvadoran heritage, just like these kinds of things from being *fronterizo* or just understanding the frontier. And I think that that's just truly special because I think that that's what you did. Also, if you don't mind me saying in a didactic way, with the muralism work and with you helping establish Balmy Alley.

So let's get a little bit more into that, which I think is very important because your collaboration—as you said, you were roommates, which always is a very fun thing when you're younger, of course.

How is that moment in which you were like roommates and start to just even dream about what you would be doing after a few years, or when you grow up, in quotation marks? Because that's a thing that you think when you're that young, starting to be with friends and younger people that might be interested in things. And then you recognize that these things—oh, I'm interested in them too.

How was that process of understanding yourself by being with Ana, and understanding yourself by being with Mia?

**AM:** Yeah, well I could say that—so when I came from San Francisco City College and I met Mia at the 24th Street Place, the tutorial center for the Latino children in the community. 24th Street, right? I had been studying at City College. They had a great photography program. And so I was interested in photography.

And one of the things that I remember was that as soon as I walked into the photography lab at City College, I smelled the developers, the chemicals, and I realized, Oh my God, this smells exactly like my *padrino's* photography studio in El Salvador.

Because in our little neighborhood in El Salvador, we had a professional children's photographer. He had a studio, and so, of course, our parents would take us to the studio to get our photos taken. But it was like—I was maybe two years old, two to four years old, when—maybe younger—getting my photograph at the *padrino's* photo studio in El Salvador.

And then when I walked into City College, it was like, Oh, my God. It smells just like his studio. So there was that huge connection.

So I was interested in photography, and I had done some at City College. And then when I went to meet Mia—Mia was such a creative force, you could say. Yeah, you were such a creative force. And I remember the house, the apartment, that you had on upper—she had on upper 24th Street [*cross talk*] Yeah, she had a little house there, and the whole space was so creative—the way she had it [was] very nice, very creative. And so it's like, wow, I kind of hit the jackpot in terms of [meeting] someone [like Mia,] who had that creativity.

And so Mia was there working with the children, working in the arts. And 24th Street Place actually was, actually right in front of—across the street from where Balmy Alley—I don't know if it ends or begins there on 24th Street.

**MG:** We call it the beginning.

**AM:** OK, so Mia was like facing, I realized that—no, she was facing Balmy Alley, just in front of her. And you know her mind, I think, started working, developing what was going on there. And then of course, we were only a couple of blocks from Galería de la Raza. So there was always that connection—you being an artist and me being interested in photography. And the photography artists from, that exhibited, at Galería [in 1973]—Adál Maldonado was one of them.

**MG:** Oh, my God. Amazing, amazing photographer.

**AM:** Was like a genius. Surrealist.

**MG:** Surrealist.

**AM:** A Surrealist artist from New York. Nuyorican. And he was all like Mr. Slick.

**MG:** We had never met anybody like that.

**AM:** Yeah, that's right.

**MG:** We had never before [*cross talk*]. And we're like Californians. East meets West, in the most bizarre kind of way. But he was fascinating.

**AM:** Oh, he was fascinating.

**MG:** He was fascinating. And all his genius—what it did, it just—

**AM:** He [attended and] worked at the San Francisco Art Institute.

**MG:** Sparked us like crazy, and it sparked me. I know it did a lot for you and your photography.

**AM:** Yeah, and then, of course, there were a couple of other artists at the Art Institute. Irene [Pérez] was there. Irene was at the Art Institute, and then I went to the Art Institute for a short bit, in the photography department. But looking back at it, you know, City College had a much—

**MG:** A better situation.

**AM:** A better, yeah, a much better lab, but they had very good photographers.

**MG:** But it should be known.

**AM:** But so there were all those connections, always, kind of going back and forth.

**MG:** But it should be recognized, too, that the San Francisco Art Institute was still pretty much of an elitist situation. My mentor, José Ramón Lerma who was bohemian and [an] abstract artist—he was phenomenal.

**AM:** Yeah, he came from the Abstract Expressionist era.

**MG:** Fabulous—and he was [part of] that North Beach group; he's one of the characters written in the book, [*Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*]. He was amazing. But he was real güerito (fair-haired), he was very light. He's Mexican, but he's light. And he was the first one to tell you, he says, no—there was a lot of racism in many respects. We didn't call it that because it was this kind of newer word. But it was clear that people of color were not the most welcome people. And it was difficult for the young women to really get a better—get better leverage within that. They were able to do it, but it was a struggle. It definitely was a struggle. It wasn't necessarily the most open-door policy going on.

**AM:** Well the San Francisco Art Institute, which is a major—

**MG:** And it's beautiful.

**AM:** Major school, right, of art. I think when I said, when I went there, which was in, actually, the late fifties, it was an Abstract Expressionist era. So, what were there? Three Mexicans, three Chicanos students in the whole school? [José Ramón Lerma, Luis Cervantes, and Ernie Palomino.]

**MG:** [*cross talk*] And Miro? What's the other sculptor?

**AM:** Oh, God, I can't remember.

**MG:** Start's with an M—

**AM:** Yeah, but there were only about three of them.

**MG:** And he was one of the three.

**AM:** He may be the only; José [Ramón] Lerma may be the only Chicano Abstract Expressionist.

**MG:** He is the one. And he actually graduated from there.

**AM:** And he did graduate. Ernie—was it Ernie?

**MG:** Rivera? My cousin?

**AM:** No, not your cousin. Another. But anyway, there were, like, three of them. I have actually a couple of books that talk about the history.

But then when our era came, when our generation came, let's see—I was there. He had come from New York. A couple of our Samoan friends, our Samoan artists, which were part of the Mission community. They got scholarships to go to the Art Institute and then the Chicana women, Irene—and did Graciela [Carrillo] also?

**MG:** Graciela [Carrillo] and Patricia [Rodriguez]. Yeah, the three of them.

**AM:** OK, so they also obtained scholarships to go to San Francisco Art Institute, which is, yes, elite. I mean, when you walk to the school—because I attended there—you walked to the school and you realize, Oh my God, most of the Anglo people basically came from monied families. Sometimes the kids, I guess, [they] didn't know what the heck they wanted to do with their lives, so they went to art school. But it was certainly an interesting experience—a lot of history there too.

**MG:** Lots of kids. So a little bit more on that San Francisco Art Institute. What was one of the struggles for the young women who became Mujeres Muralistas via Balmy Alley?

**AM:** Which were Irene, Patricia, and Graciela.

**MG:** And Graciela. That their art form was so—it wasn't something that you could put in a box. So when it came time for their work, when they were doing their work, they didn't receive their—it wasn't received with great open arms. They had to really kind of work with it. Because the professors or the art teachers or instructors—the sense of Latina work was not as familiar. Now it's all over the place. But it wasn't—

**AM:** Yeah, they had a different aesthetic, different backgrounds.

**MG:** The sense of use of color, the use of style; it was something that they were ahead of the curve [on]. Except being—when you go ahead, you're also kind of—

**AM:** Out.

**MG:** You're pushed back and out, so it was a real struggle for them.

**AM:** But you know what's interesting too—

**MG:** But they did it.

**AM:** About the Art Institute is that there's a [Diego Rivera] mural at the Art Institute. So again, that connection that one would not anticipate, but, you know, there it is.

**MYISA PLANCQ-GRAHAM:** It might be nice too, since we're talking about community and your personal connections to the Mission and to the city—and to the Art Institute and the community of artists there. I feel like a lot of these themes are coming into a moment of synergy. And obviously I'm a little bit aware of your work in creating Balmy Alley and talking about Las Mujeres Muralistas, who were looking for ways to continue to be professional artists and get their work seen. I really would love to hear about the beginnings of the creation of Balmy Alley. How did this come to be? What did it at the beginning—how did it happen? Tell us. Walk us through.

**AM:** So all those issues, all those factors were in place.

**MG:** Yeah. So how it came to be, actually, was a trip I had to—I was living in Mexico. Because my family doesn't have direct roots any longer in Mexico. I needed to find out how to be, what Mexico was, and who I am within it. So in our family—unlike Ana's family whose Spanish was never [discouraged], our family was—

My grandmother, because of coming here—if you spoke Spanish, [they] were just, like, we're not hiring. You're not here. You're not here; you're invisible. So my grandma, who never spoke Spanish, lived here for well over fifty years, [and] was insistent that her children only spoke English. Everybody spoke Spanish, and they could understand—

**AM:** Excuse me. Your mother, your grandmother never—you may have to edit, but your grandmother never spoke English.

**MG:** I mean, English. See I can't even speak English, and I'm trying to speak Spanish. That's why she's my compadre.

**CG:** But if you think of it, the thing of oral histories is that, *yes muy especial porque las dos están hablando* (It's very special because you both are chatting), and you're reconstructing memories together. This is how we remember things and sometimes we make a mistake that is so interesting. Why is it that we were thinking of Spanish? And of course, your relationship to Spanish, you told me, that's something I want to ask you about later, but let's continue in that thread of, what is it that made this community even start in this way?

**MG:** So, basically, why I'm bringing that Mexico experience was because I learned how to—I was exposed to a lifestyle of Mexicans and how they live. And I was in San Miguel de Allende and I was also living in Celaya.

I went there to dig ditches, actually, to bring water to a community that was pretty impoverished. For some reason I had the good fortune, for me, to not have to do that job. So they put me in more of a city. So I would—on Sundays, the families would go to the plaza. There's a plaza across the street from a church and there's usually a gazebo in the middle. So the bands would play, families would sit around on these beautiful ornate benches, and the young men and women would walk around the little gazebo—men one way, girls another way.

But what I was liking about all of that was the sense of the community, how families were together. [It] didn't matter if you were wealthy or poor or middle or whatever—everybody was there. It was a place to communicate. It was peaceful and loving, playful, and all that sort of business. And I really liked that.



And then I was learning about Dr. [*inaudible*] who was a philosopher and a teacher. And he lived at the foot of the volcano in Cuernavaca. And what I liked about his sense of theory about education, art, philosophy—everything—was that everyone comes to a table with something. It doesn't matter how educated you are; everybody has something.

So he had a very kind of an open-air school, so to speak. So you learn how to know that you are—[it] doesn't matter what you have; you are another human who's making a contribution to a community of choice. And so I always thought that was very impressive.

So when I came back I was naive enough to go to a community and say, I need to do something else other than working downtown, which is what I was doing. I used to work with an oil company, and it wasn't really for me, I realized.

So I came to community work, and I was hired through another organization. Then I was able to separate and develop 24th Street Place. At that time, this is [before] or [in the] early stages of bilingual education in schools. There was a lot of development of—how do you do the books? There [were] no, not enough, bilingual books; there wasn't this and that. And a lot of children, multilingual, bilingual children, primarily Spanish-speaking children, were being diagnosed as having severe learning disabilities. We weren't going to accept that, and I said, That can't be possible. How is that possible?

So that's when we decided we have to help do something here. So that's when we decided to—or I decided with this other person—he says, “Why don't you do a tutorial?” “OK. What's a tutorial?”

So I didn't really know what there was. I assumed I knew what it was, but I did it. So that's when we developed 24th Street Place. And that became an after-school and summer program for children who were being misdiagnosed with learning disabilities. Yeah, there were some that did [have disabilities], but we figured this had to be a place that had to do with language and music and art.

And one of the things I remember clearly—I came with my little brainstorm—was that for a child to read red, know red, feel red, you had to express red. So I had gotten paint, and that's where this whole concept came to be. So where are you going to use this paint? Not just on a piece of paper, on a two-dimensional—you had to put it outside of yourself, outside of your body. Use your body in a bigger way.

So that's when I saw Balmy Alley, which was right in front. It was like it was beckoning me, you know? So then I had work-study students and volunteers and other people. We did get

some money. We had some money for employees, people to work there too. Like, let's do this project: let's do this: create a mural project in this alley where kids can work with professional artists or young artists who are developing their art form and their professionalism as artists—work together. Because they're the teachers to these kids. That's where they're going to know where red is. That's where they're going to know where blue is. That's where they're going to know how to blend and how you make things work. And it was such an amazing experience. It was great.

But we went beyond that too. We also incorporated theater and music and dance. And it was really—it was really fun. It was a lot of work, but it was the kind of work that was received with a lot of joy and curiosity.

I think being useful like that—we didn't feel any constrictions, I don't feel. I don't feel we felt restricted to anything. And during that time, we're talking a few years, many years ago, there was no real quote unquote, borders around us, so to speak.

We weren't—the city is very conservative, you know. And it was also very proper. So when we were growing up—and I got to jump over to this one. When we grew up, going downtown meant gloves, hats, and proper shoes to go downtown. So there was a real sense of properness. So when it started to break away, I think post-hippie world—the hippie world sort of broke those barriers. So we were kind of like, Hey, we were at the end of that one, but it was there.

So working with children was a real good vessel for us to—for creativity and thought, actually—to develop our community. Balmy Alley existed because the streets on Harrison and Shotwell were kind of—there was a lot of gangs, just put it straightforward. There was a lot of kind of disruptiveness.

Our kids, many of our children, came from the projects on the other side of Garfield Park, and it was a hard, hard place for them. So when they would come to us on 24th Street, they used Balmy Alley as their throughway, as their free space. But Balmy Alley was kind of a—was a mess, a real mess. Huge potholes, broken cars, two-way street. Can you imagine two cars? It's a one-way street. [*cross talk*]

So our goal and our dream was to get the potholes repaired, repair some of those fences, and to get those cars off the street so that they wouldn't be parked there anymore—so that we could take it over, so we would be the ones who would be—now [it would be considered] beautifying the street.

The whole goal of that was to make it a place of safety and a place for families to walk up and down—much like that experience I had in Mexico, where the plaza was a safe place for families to congregate, to meet, and to be.

And I think that's exactly how we started that, so that it would be a safe place for kids. It was a lot of work to get permission to do the alley, though. And it was a lot of work. We had no guides. We had nobody to teach us. We were self-taught. We taught ourselves. And so I knew that [I] just can't go to that fence over there that's falling apart and just randomly paint on it—no. I had the insight to go, Who owns that property? And that became a whole 'nother ball of wax. That one is like, Oh boy. So I created this questionnaire and I gave it to the trustee board students.

**AM:** Me. [*laughs*]

**MG:** To go up and down—there was a few—up and down to each one of those houses on Harrison Street, 25th Street, down Balmy Alley, up 24th Street, down Shotwell, and around again. We canvased, I think, up and down those stairs to find out who the landlords were or if they were the property owners and families. And they would come back with—you guys would come back with stories about some of those families that we weren't ready for. Some of the families were just—it was really rough. Multiple families in units. Or fear that we were part of immigration and we're—no, not us. And we're just immigration?

**CG:** Continuing in that vein because it's very important—not only Balmy Alley as what it is today, but the specific decisions, geographically, just the geographic area that Balmy Alley is in. On one side, on the other side, and what's in there—there were a lot of decisions that you made, and [that] Ana and others helped you make, for Balmy to be strategically what it became. And as you were saying, you were self-taught, and this is something that you got some support [for], but you had to constantly be looking for that support.

What were some of those things that you were thinking as the vision of not only beautifying Balmy, the Mission, and San Francisco, but also why is it that it has to be Balmy Alley and nowhere else? There's a very specific reason that I think I can say, which is kids and families. Why? Do you explain—can you explain that to someone that is not familiar with the area?

**MG:** As I had said earlier, Balmy Alley was right in front of the place that we were working. So it was our doorway in many respects, right? And we also—once again, that alley had to be that safe harbor. These kids were coming from public housing and the projects and some of them came over the hill from the Alemany projects. So we had kids that had a life that I never saw, and they needed someplace safe.

So in doing so, it was real important for us to make that alley a safe place. In doing so, we also found out who were the absentee landlords and that's when I realized—so how do I find out who the landlords are? So I figured, oh, city hall. You go to city hall, you look in the big—just get the address, because they already had the addresses. And I went to city hall, and that's how I knew who owned those properties. Were those people actually from here [or] were they not? And then to actually make contact with them.

And making contact with those landlords—many of them were pretty receptive. They said, “Why do you want to paint our fence?” I told them why. “OK.” And then, and “Your fence is falling down.” “Well, do you want me to fix it?” “If you want to fix it, you can, but we'll do what we can. We're not going to rebuild; we're not going to give you a brand new fence. We just want to paint on your fence.”

So it was kind of an interesting process. I learned using that city hall thing to get a place on 20th Street where we became roommates—on 20th Street. That's how I found [out] about that place. It was great, a fabulous house that I found, and I found out who the landlord is. And he asked, “How did you find me?” And I said, “I looked you up in the big book from city hall.” He thought that was really clever. So he goes, “OK, yeah, sure, you can rent here.”

So again, self-taught—things that you don't know [how] to do. And I think a little bit of that may have been a weird place of how, as immigrants—because I'm not an immigrant—but maybe sometimes you learn things because you have to or you want to or there's a need, somehow. And in this case, it was a need; we needed housing and I wanted to get our three projects underway.

**CG:** Yeah. Ana, when you think of these specific projects and your role in it, do you mind describing exactly how you were helping Mia and the project? And also that part of your life, including, for example, the life—the living with Mia or these kinds of very important interpersonal relationships that led to a very collaborative project. Because that's an interesting thing that I would like to hear from you specifically, while working with Mia.

**MG:** I want to make a correction. It wasn't about me helping because I'm like a finger on a hand. So I just want to have you rethink about that one. It was—our organization was 24th Street Place, and I never, yeah, I was the head of that, and it was something I wanted to do. But it was a dream shared. And so I think because we all had sort of that consciousness of wanting to work together. So I just want help to correct that, that it wasn't—because it makes me feel like a big *mandona* (bossy) kind of thing. Sometimes I was, but sometimes you've got to give a push, so it's a collaborative.

**CG:** Yes and that's OK because the assumption that I was trying to make was what you were saying, that it's more of the collaboration. It's more the implication that she's here with you and she worked with you and you were also supervising. So the great thing about this project is that we're constructing the histories of the Mission through each one of your voices—and because it was such a collaborative, interpersonal project, not only the murals but all of this infrastructure that got created with Balmy Alley.

I love what you just said because that is a very important emphasis of what we need, which is the larger spectrum of experiences. And you can speak of both things that Mia's saying, you can speak to your relationship to Mia and your organization, 24th Street, but also Balmy and your life. What do you think of that time?

**AM:** Well, I was a City College student and ,you know—no money, living on work-study. But you could do it in those days, you know what I mean? Rents were so much more affordable, not just in terms of inflation, but they just were much more affordable, especially the Mission. Now nothing's affordable.

So I was a young student going to school, studying photography and other—trying to prepare for four-year college or university. And Mia was the director of the center. Mia does have great leadership qualities. So she was a very good leader in that regard, and she did have this idea that she wanted to paint murals in Balmy Alley.

Now that was huge because Balmy Alley's a—it's a very ambitious program. It was a big idea. It's like, OK, go to every house, and all I cared [about] was, "Hey, could you sign the paper because this gives us permission?" Now that was my thing. And as Mia said, the people who owned the house said, "Yeah, go ahead." You know they had no problems. As you said, landlords didn't necessarily live there. So she did that other research.

But it was a big, ambitious program to paint every fence, backyard, whatever space [or] wall was available on Balmy Alley, which was behind these two streets. So we did that; we got the signatures. There was, at that time, and in our kind of—I have a little bit of a different memory about this but, I recall that there had been a mural in the Balmy Alley by Irene and, I think, Patricia. And so—it's still there, as you were saying; it's two nymphs playing flute. And Irene, she was so cute. She looked like a nymph. [*laughs*]

**MG:** She looked like one of them.

**AM:** She's really cute. But you know what I think? I think the other nymph was Patrick.

**MG:** Oh, could have been, yeah.

**AM:** Yeah.

**MG:** It could have been Patrick.

**AM:** Remember, her Chinese boyfriend?

**MG:** I do. I didn't say anything about that.

**AM:** He looked like a little nymph too.

**MG:** Very cute.

**AM:** But anyway, and yeah, they were friends, so.

**CG:** Can you tell me the last name of Patrick?

**AM:** Oh, was it Patrick Kwong? It's Chinese from Hong Kong. I actually have a photograph of him if you ever want it. But he was good friends with Irene, and I think she'd paint and he played flute. So I think because they were friends, there are two nymphs playing flute.

**MG:** Back to back.

**AM:** And then the Mujeres actually, or Patricia, lived on the alley.

**MG:** She lived on the alley.

**AM:** Irene may have lived on the alley too.

**MG:** Maybe briefly with her.

**AM:** But there was—let's say there was the one, and Mia's ambition was to paint multiples. So we needed resources because where are we going—'cause it's very particular paint. It has to be a high-quality paint and [in] many colors. So at that time, René Yañez, the director of Galería, who had now established themselves on 24th Street—

**MG:** With Ralph Maradiaga.

**AM:** With Ralph Maradiaga, who was the assistant director. Well, Mia knew them, so she had communication with them. And I knew them because I wanted to exhibit there. But he was able to get—he liked the idea very much and he was able to actually get paints for us, to do the project. And at the same time, he was able to engage some of the professional artists. It reminded me of Carlos Loarca, who's a Guatemalteco. But he was a professional artist, and he actually came out to the—the day that the kids started painting one of the walls, he actually came out and worked with the kids. And definitely you can see that it's more. It's not just a kid's mural because he would just direct them and do certain things to make it more professional.

So Mia was able to engage, get those resources, get the help of René and Ralph and the artist, and get the kids out there every day, this was during the summer. Get the kids out there to paint and get the professional artists to come in and work with the kids.

And then as part of that, I was more instrumental in putting [together] a performance activity. So we had the San Francisco Arts Commission Neighborhood Arts Center come down and lend us some stages—set up stages—for performers. So then we had like the Samoan dancers because it was a good-sized Samoan community here in the Mission. And then we had other young kids, young men who were—they had a singing group, remember? They would come out and sing. So we had all kinds of activities, our performance activities, going on at the same time that they were painting.

So it did build up, as you were saying, a synergy. And it was quite surprising, as I was telling Mia. You know that was, yeah, synergy, but somehow, some way, that energy just kind of grew and grew. Because then all of Balmy Alley had been painted. And artists started to see that as successful, and they wanted to now participate in reviving the alley. And that was over the summer months of—was it '72? '70—we can't recall. '72, '73. [Note: It took place in the summer of 1973.]

**MG:** Yeah, '71, '72.

**AM:** It was, yeah, between that period. But Mia had this very ambitious idea, and she was able to get people to come in and buy into it, get the resources. And the artists really liked it, and they came out and—as I said, we had performers. And then the various communities, like the Filipino community, the Samoan community, [and] of course, [the] Latino community.

**MG:** In addition.

**AM:** And so that's what we started talking more about—well, it's a “developing country” community. And then out of that developed also the *Mujeres de Aztlán* [show]. Because it

was interesting—the 24th Street Place is really run by women. Let's see, Galería de la Raza was very male at that point. And so we were trying to bring that consciousness about female [power] into the picture, the bigger picture. Of course you had the Mujeres Muralistas, who were establishing themselves at that time. And they were producing—that summer, they produced a beautiful mural I keep calling *Taco Loco* [note: the title is Paco's Tacos], behind—

**MG:** McDonald's.

**AM:** Behind that McDonald's, they did that really beautiful one. And oh, wow, you saw the talent and the skill. Of course, they were skilled. They'd gone to art school.

But then that was the year, or after the summer, that we then went to Galería and said, "We want to have a women's art show." And so then René [Yañez] said, "OK, that's fine. We can have one." And it was interesting. I was telling Mia that I don't know how many artists that there were—eight, maybe, of us? I have the names. But there was only—so all of them were Latina women and there was Joyce Ajuna, the one Hawaiian. [*laughs*]

**MG:** Our dear friend.

**AM:** From the community. And so then we had to call it *Third World Women's Art* exhibit. But you know there was that consciousness of women as artists and women in the community. I think that became more clear that women were trying to carve out space for themselves.

**CG:** That's, I think, fundamental. Mia, you can go.

**MG:** What I find real interesting about that is, yeah, it was Latina-based for the most part. But we were also—because we had Joyce and we had other women, we—

**AM:** And the children.

**MG:** And the children—we were able to be more broad-minded about them. So that's when—especially the women's show, *Mujeres de Aztlán*, it's more open and less territorial-like.

So I think that, for me, was again—we [were] all kind of [at] that early stage of finding ourselves and definitions and finding what our community looks like. And that tapestry alone is something that I think that people didn't always recognize—that the collaboration to make something for a uniform, unified, base was something kind of new and exciting.



**AM:** Also don't forget the sexual orientation in the community, that some of the artists—OK, so some of the female artists were lesbian women and, of course, some of the artists were gay men.

**MG:** But?

**AM:** But at that time that was not like a forefront issue. I mean, we knew it and we accepted—it was fine. But it was not an issue that was at the forefront. So that developed, though later on, which I think was good.

But, yeah, a lot of seminal issues were evolving at the time, including the gentrification—because I think you all know that once you get artists coming in, or not coming into the community—let's say working in the community—and that becomes known. Now it seems that you could say we're opening it up to gentrification. And then that becomes a whole other social issue.

And there were political groups in the community, the Mission Coalition Organization, for example. They were a very Saul Alinsky-esque organization that was advocating for, let's say, housing, because most of the people in the Mission community did not own their homes. They were renters. So they were advocating for people being able to buy property, and of course jobs, and then problems with the police.

**MG:** That was huge.

**AM:** That was at the forefront because there was a lot of violence from the police. They were very abusive. So those were economic and social issues. The immigrant issue was not as highly evolved at that time.

**MG:** No, it wasn't. But it was still kind of in the underbelly.

**AM:** Well, of course, because the Mission was an integrated community, a community made of immigrants. But these were activists, Latino activists. The education, of course—that's how 24th Street got started.

Those were issues that were very important to the community. And there were groups and activists working on those issues at the same time that we were looking at the arts as a vehicle for social change and social justice.

**MG:** In addition, just housing and jobs, police brutality that was just—

**AM:** Yeah, it was pretty bad.

**MG:** It was pretty awful. I mean, what we're seeing now, today, these forefront—yeah, it exists. But it was harder and worse during that time. Also health—health was another thing and mental health. So this is also the beginning times of, again, the gender issues. It didn't—I mean, the men and women who were gay, it was like, OK. You going to paint that or not? It wasn't like an issue for us, and it was a fear tactic; they were afraid, some of them. Well, they thought we weren't going to accept them. Well, why would we not accept you? You've been in here all along, why would I, why am I going to close my door now? It doesn't make any sense to me.

But I'm also bringing the health issue up because this is also when the AIDS epidemic is starting to have its uprising—it's plague, it's unfamiliarity, it's fear. And when you have the AIDS [crisis], you're also having the gender issues and so—

But I think because we were at a time with so much change happening, we just either incorporated it or—again, as Ana was talking about, the MCO and the Saul Alinsky-ish kind of philosophy [were] actually quite helpful. It helped educate us, because where else are you going to get it? It was education on the street, so to speak, but through community activism.

And the community was very powerful at the time—very, very strong. And it's also the beginnings of bilingual education. Bilingual education—can you imagine? I mean, that was very important, and this time for me [there] was a real concern about misdiagnosing children as being—

**AM:** Well, I think the misdiagnosis hits on the mental health. So with the children that we have in the families—it oftentimes became obvious that the children were having some issues based on their family situations and the functional or dysfunctional aspect of their families. I know that we had some families where alcohol was a big issue and what have you.

**MG:** And sexual abuse.

**AM:** Yeah. It was, I think, one of the problems that we had was we didn't have any mental health services specifically aimed at bicultural, bilingual families. And that was a big deficit. And yeah, we just didn't have any programs for them.

And well, my ex-husband, Ray Rivera, became very instrumental in starting, at that time, in terms of changing the mental health services for the Latino and third [culture] community here in the mission. So, yeah, he did a lot of organizing and then got the director fired

because the director was in another generation, in another time. It was related to the culture that was going on in the Mission community and the needs of mental health services.

I mean, we're not even talking health, physical health; we're talking mental health services in the community. So that was also something that was arising within the San Francisco Department of Public Health. And you know San Francisco General Hospital was also here in the Mission, on Potrero, and that was kind of a big institution but that didn't really relate to the community at that time, yeah.

**MG:** And [this] was also where—because of Ray Rivera and his advocacy for health and mental health—where Instituto [Familiar] de la Raza, which is a mental health institute here now. [*cross talk*] had to develop. And it came out of a Mission neighborhood health center which is on 16th Street.

So little centers, little things had to develop in order to become more—have more advocacy to the community, primarily focusing [on] Latinos but open for everybody.

**AM:** At the same time, they had an artistic cultural component to them. So the things that I think were happening—let's say at Balmy Alley—with this infusion of Latino artists and working with children and Latino art themes, it's almost as if that synergy provided a foundation for these other things to blossom, like the mental health services related to Latinos, but in a culturally appropriate way. There [had] been none of that before; that's why the prior director, you know, was basically fired by the community itself, which was a pretty bold move. But I think that kind of synergy within the arts community really influenced even that.

**MG:** Yeah. It was a launching pad. I mean, literally, Balmy Alley became—it became a launching pad.

**AM:** Once it was established and [there] was all that energy and interest—it really was the basis of a lot of other things evolving and developing.

So the arts can be strange, right? The arts can be such a powerful incentive for change. And I was just mentioning, of course, gentrification. It could also be a change for that. Just like everything else, it has its ups and its downs, its positives and its negatives.

But because, it was interesting, right? At that time, you never saw a non-Latino or non-third-world person in the Mission. If you saw a white person in the Mission, that was really rare. I mean, to see a white person walking up 24th Street or up and down 24th Street?

**MG:** No.

**AM:** No. [*laughs*]

**MG:** No. It didn't really happen. Or they were touring, and they wanted to go to a Mexican restaurant.

**AM:** Yeah, yeah, even then it was a little unusual. But then again, that's—the arts do open up the world. And it's a good form of communication, I guess, in that regard too. Because that's what you have now here in Balmy Alley. You have—Balmy Alley continues to grow, continues to change, et cetera, et cetera. Other people started working on it, took it over. But it still attracts a lot of tourism, and people from all over the world come to Balmy Alley to experience that.

**MG:** This still remains the only alley in the city, I believe, that's completely painted.

**AM:** Is Clarion?

**MG:** I'm pretty sure. Clarion [*is*] too, but it's more—

**AM:** But it's not community—

**MG:** It's not community-oriented. It's different.

**AM:** Whereas Balmy has very grassroots community basis.

**CG:** It also has that mission and vision of trying to unite these two parts of the city that are, of course, related geographically by Balmy Alley, where all of these families, all of these kids, all of these people, would have to go through to get to the park also. And there's so many decisions that you both made that really made Balmy Alley this kind of special place. Not only are you talking about the Latino population in the seventies and the eighties, which was the part where there was the biggest demographic jump of Latinos, but also all of these other people—Samoan, Filipino—just people that lived in the Mission.

And I want to challenge you both to think of art, not only as sustenance but also as a catalyst. Because that's what you did with Balmy Alley. It was—it's art. And it is useful and purposeful in really bringing about community but also an awareness of who the community is and what the community stands for. And if you see the art that is depicted even to this day there, it doesn't have a lot of iconography that doesn't look like everyone in this room currently,

which is something that is incredible that doesn't happen often with a lot of other street art or other places that do have this kind of art form.

So one thing that I wanted to ask is, when you started working on the project and, as you were also saying, it was primordial, even 24th Street. You were starting from women and children and nonbinary folks too. But it was just so welcoming and so incredible to be able to collaborate in such a way that would bring about this change.

I'm going to ask you specifically about one identity, two identities, which would be being a woman, and being a Latina or Latinx. When you have those two things, how did those two things change throughout time in the seventies, eighties, and how you see it now?

Because you gave us a good overview of even things that still we see to this day—the police brutality, all of this treatment [of] immigrants. Just a couple of weeks ago the vice president of the United States said to Guatemalans, “No, no *vengan*—just don't come.” It's still as present as it was back then.

So, speaking specifically about being a Latina, being a woman, how has that changed over time? How do you perceive yourself and how did you perceive yourself, even back then?

**AM:** Well, I think opportunities have opened up certainly since we were back in those days. I think we had a sense of confidence. Let's say, for myself, because my mother was such a strong person, such a leader, such a visionary, et cetera, et cetera. She was very independent. She knew how to take care of herself. She took care of her family. And my mother never imposed limits. She said, “Don't ever say you can't do something.”

**MG:** It was like that.

**AM:** “OK, Mom.” [*laughs*] “If somebody asks you to do something, say you could do it.”

**MG:** I like that.

**AM:** So I thought that was kind of funny, but that was her attitude. You can do pretty much anything you want to do if you set your mind to it and you work at it. So I had that confidence. I think Mia did also. She had attended—she was an educated person and I was an educated—

**MG:** Artist person too.

**AM:** Yeah. So we had that confidence but you didn't have the support here. OK, so that's why we had to go, we had to walk up.

**MG:** Those stairs.

**AM:** Twenty-four, yeah. And up to 24th Street and tell René [Yañez]: René we're going to do this and we want you to help us. And he was—he was very gracious. He liked the idea and he was supportive.

And then I remember walking even further up 24th Street, [for] *Mujeres de Aztlán*, to get the art show from René—that was the one. And then walk up farther to get to Mission Media Arts, which was a group that was doing a lot with video, film, KQED—trying to open up KQED to do more community programming.

**MG:** And training.

**AM:** And to train—to train Latinos to work in the industry. Because that was pretty closed.

**MG:** It was closed.

**AM:** It was pretty closed. And yeah, we did a lot of organizing around the media here in San Francisco—KRON, KPIX, KQED. Yeah, I mean, they had no Latinos working in their stations, in their programs.

**MG:** And they weren't in the forefront. They were not your weatherperson or your news person.

**AM:** No, nothing! Latinos just weren't there; you never saw a Spanish name. OK, now you can tell what the difference is. Oh, my God, look, there's the Spanish. You never saw a Spanish name on any of their credits, nothing like that.

So then we, us *Mujeres Muralistas*—not *Mujeres Muralistas*, pardon—*Mujeres de Aztlán* went up to Mission Media Workshop and said, “Hey you know, you guys need to incorporate more women into your program so that we can get into the stations.” And actually, they were able to open up an apprenticeship program for some women. And I went to—

**MG:** Because she was one of them.

**AM:** Study camera work because I was a photographer. So I did study some camerawork and media production. And what was the station here?

**MG:** KQED

**AM:** Community. There was another. No, KQED was big-time. [*cross talk*]

**MG:** That was the door we were really trying to open.

**AM:** There was a community program here that still exists, where we had this little show. And I was the hostess, and I interviewed artists and activists from Mexico.

**MG:** Oh, my God; I forgot about that.

**AM:** What have you done? Yeah and we produced a couple of videos. We also produced a video on the Mujeres Muralistas.

**MG:** That's right.

**AM:** Which I told you we have film of.

**MG:** Gotta keep that one.

**AM:** Oh, maybe—you know what? I need to share it with you all.

So anyway, as I said, yeah, I think women—we had the confidence and we had the capabilities, but we didn't have the support of the community or society in general. And I think that's what we needed to work on further.

I ended up going to law school after all of this—graduated and I became an attorney and all. I think when I went to law school, which is here at Hastings College of the Law, art class was the largest women's class that had been at Hastings.

So these doors were opening. But I think very much—a lot of us were pretty much on our own, and we had to depend on other women who were working and active to kind of get us going, to give us the energy, to give us the courage to confront some of these spaces that were closed to us and to walk through and make the adjustments to being in those spaces and being part of that.

**MG:** Well, to have the right to sit at the table. To have the right to be able to have the decision-making. To have the right to be the leadership.

**AM:** Yeah. we only had, like, two Latino—two Latino politicians.

**MG:** If that. If we were lucky.

**AM:** In San Francisco. Yeah, in San Francisco we only had, like, two. Actually my ex-husband ran for supervisor because at one point San Francisco decided that they would go by neighborhoods supervisorial. And so then he ran for the supervisor. That was quite a show.

**MG:** It was quite the beginning.

**AM:** Yeah, but I think we did get a Latino.

**MG:** Yeah, we did.

**AM:** We got one. I forget who it was. Anyway, I was telling Mia I remember that our car got vandalized and then stolen. [*laughs*] It was crazy.

**MG:** All part of politicking.

**AM:** But then again, kind of pushing that—because, yeah, there was, I think, there was only one politician or Latino politician. But he was more like corporate. The people who supported him were, you know, wealthy interests. And then, of course, maybe one or two women supervisors in San Francisco. So you saw no openly—I mean, before Harvey Milk—no openly gay—

**MG:** No openly gay at all.

**AM:** Women politicians. So a lot of these institutions were fairly closed, and you had to make a lot of effort to open them up, which eventually, slowly, slowly, has happened. But that was the very beginnings, I think, of that.

**MG:** Yeah. I think developing our teeth at Balmy Alley was really kind of a good stronghold for us. We did kind of an impossible thing; it was a monumental task, but we were pretty fearless. We didn't accept any noes; we just said, "OK, we'll go to the next one." We would just work around it. But we were pretty good—when you have youth on your side, I think. And we knew there had to be a need for change, but we weren't necessarily going to duke it out with you. We were going to figure it out another way. We were using our brain, actually.

And I think that that's what happened, because the women in that particular group were very smart. And again, many of us were either students or self-taught; and if you don't learn that



somewhere along the line, then you're not going to be successful. You have to be, I think, you have to not have any fear. Much like what you were saying a little earlier about what your mother would say. Like, her mother would say just, if they say you can do it, say yes. Although you really can't, but.

**AM:** I'll figure it out.

**MG:** You'll figure it out; you'll figure it out.

**AM:** Well that's what we're doing now—figuring it out.

**MG:** Yes. I think we were at that point of life, of change, where things had to open up. It just had to open up. The seventies, I mean, you look at it worldly, a little more worldly—AIDS was happening. The post-hippie, the bohemian era was, they were already opening—the bohemians were kind of for us; somewhere back here, [they] influenced us and the sense of their poetry.

**AM:** The beatniks.

**MG:** The beatnik time. The music, the poetry, the literature, [and] the art. My mentor [José Ramón Lerma] was in that generation so, they just kept going along. And they incorporated politics within it, within their community. And I think you can never separate that. You can be bought out, I'm sure.

Unfortunately, we weren't. We needed to have them buy in to us. Very different. Very, very different.

It's just different. We all went in our different paths, afterward. I think it was two years later, pretty much, maybe three, that we had to close 24th Street, I think, at some point.

**AM:** Well, that was actually another tragedy because the program was defunded.

**CG:** When was this exactly?

**AM:** '75, '76? Around that?

**MG:** Yeah. Exactly. Yeah, because then I got—we all had to, yeah, it was exactly then.

**AM:** Yeah. So that program got defunded. The Mission Coalition Organization [MCO] was defunded. And then after that, then with the school withdrawing the arts, music, and those kinds of programs.

**MG:** Art, music, and dance.

**AM:** Yeah, all those unacademic programs, those got defunded. So you kind of have to ask, well, what was going on? Why defund these at this time? It could have been that maybe there was too much activity within the communities, and they decided to cut that back.

**MG:** It's a very good point—because what happened is that now, the community has grown, grown their strength. And so now they're not going to accept—I'm not necessarily going to accept the second, the scraps, anymore. We need to be this. We need these things. We need to have better education. We need to have our health services. We need to have a better eye on the police issues. And there was those kind of things.

So when you start growing, when you're fitting into your shoes better, you're standing up taller, then you're becoming—you're questioning the authority, and that was threatening. So you want to threaten us? We'll show you what we can do—take the money away from you. We'll start eliminating—we'll start just taking money away, less and less and less.

So we lost our jobs. We had to fold; we had to close. So many of us had to find another way to survive. And that's when we all sort of changed. But the time was also critical. I don't know [whether] it was [because] Vietnam had already ended or, you know, the world was changing.

**AM:** It was always there; it was always in the background during—

**MG:** The state strikes, UC Berkeley strikes. I mean, you know we love this story. Patty Hearst—we love this one.

**AM:** Patty Hearst was in the Mission, you know.

**MG:** She'd go to her—

**AM:** She used to come to my mother's restaurant. My mother actually established a restaurant in 24th at Mission.

**CG:** *¿Cómo se llamaba?* (What was it called?)

**AM:** *Se llamaba* Rinconcito Salvadoreño (It was called “The Salvadorean Corner”). Yeah, I think it was the second Salvadorean restaurant. There had been one before, and it was still going on. But most of the restaurants were Mexican at that point, and then I think my mom established the second [Salvadorian] one. And the SLA, right? Yeah. Symbionese Liberation—

**MG:** —Front.

**AM:** Whatever. Yeah, and so Patty Hearst was—they discovered them living on Precita Street, which is in the Mission.

**MG:** Yeah, and then they moved up to where my mother lives.

**AM:** Oh, did they? But when they lived at Precita, they used to come.

**MG:** Down the street.

**AM:** To my mom’s restaurant. My auntie would say, “Yeah, I saw her. She—they—came to the restaurant; they had *pupusas* or whatever.” I said, “Really?”

And then Mia said that a couple of our friends said, “Oh yeah, we just saw Patty Hearst at, what, 24th Street?”

**MG:** Yeah, they were buying fruit and vegetables down the street. And then one of our friends who, an associate of the 24th Street Place, she came in, she says, “I just saw Patty Hearst.” I said, “No, you didn’t.” She goes, “Yeah, I did. I did. I saw Patty Hearst.” I go, “No, you did not see Patty Hearst.” And she’s looking at me, “I did not see Patty Hearst.” Because we knew—we knew CIA was undercover. We knew they were in the community. We knew that. We were very cool with that.

**AM:** Yeah, the FBI.

**MG:** We were real—we knew it.

**AM:** And then it’d been like, I mean.

**MG:** The Black Panthers were—

**AM:** The Black Panthers had been very strong before then. But they got shut down.

**MG:** Black Panthers would park their truck in front of 24th Street Place, and then they would give—when they were doing the free food, lunch stuff. So they came in and asked, “Can we park our truck in front of your store?” [They were] sure I’m gonna say no. “Why, of course!” “But we have these free foods that we’re—boxes of food that we want to give to people like you.” “Yeah, sounds good to me.”

**AM:** Free food.

**MG:** Free food boxes—yay.

**AM:** So anyway, there was all that kind of stuff too, going on in the background. But then many programs were cut.

**MG:** Defunded.

**AM:** Around education. The health programs, like the mental health, that kept kind of slowly going on. That was not defunded.

**MG:** Well, they finally were able to hook up themselves with the San Francisco Public—

**AM:** San Francisco Department of Public Health. Yeah. Yeah. But yeah, so it’s really weird how the leaders, elite leaders, make these decisions, and how they then affect—and why they fund some programs and not others is the big issue. Now we also had BART at the time, right?

**MG:** That was a big issue.

**AM:** The BART station was being built. Actually, there is a station next to where my mother’s restaurant was, [on Mission and 24th St. at the time] and there’s a beautiful mural there by Michael Ríos. Michael Ríos did a beautiful mural.

**MG:** You can’t see because of the trees, but—

**AM:** For my mom it was kind of difficult because they shut off the street, and so getting into the restaurant was not easy and that affected business. But there were people who were protesting against the BART because what they were saying was, you know what? Once you build the BART here—and you’re building it downtown—that’s where all the really cheap housing for what are not maybe homeless people were. So when they built the Moscone Center—what is it—they destabilized those groups of people. And what the community

activists were saying, OK, that group of people is going to start moving into your Mission now, into the Mission District. [And] you see that now on 16th Street, which is the—

**MG:** Pretty harsh.

**AM:** The first BART station for the Mission District.

**MG:** It also didn't do well for commerce. So businesses like your aunt's and other businesses that were thriving businesses along Mission Street.

**AM:** Well, yeah, because they closed the streets off for two years. I mean, it's an amazing project, what they accomplished. But it always affects the smaller [businesses].

**MG:** The act of progress.

**AM:** Yeah, and right now 16th Street is a—

**MG:** Hellhole. It's a dump. It's horrible.

**AM:** I call it a pigsty, but it's still—and it used to be a nice neighborhood. When I was a kid when we came to live in San Francisco as, immigrated into San Francisco, it was a nice neighborhood. We used to go for breakfast to the Pancake House that was there. And it was—

**MG:** A very popular place.

**AM:** Yeah, and it was a little higher-end. We even had high-end department stores on Mission Street, including where McDonald's is right now. That was a high-end clothing store, and there were home good stores that were also high-end.

**MG:** We had the Arthur Murray dance studio.

**AM:** Yeah, yeah. And so all of that started deteriorating, I think, around the time that the BART was coming in.

**MG:** We had like a Hale's. A small department—

**AM:** Oh yeah, the Hale's.

**MG:** We had Hale's, [which] was great, and Lerner's. We had these shops for us, as Latinos. They had, like, wonderful things; they had furniture. Mission Cultural Center was—

**AM:** Shaft, the Shaft Building.

**MG:** But they were high-end furniture.

**AM:** So if you look at the politics, I think, in that way, in a historical way, you could see, OK, so BART is progressive in terms of developing what is transportation. But then you realize, well, wait a minute, at the same time we really did lose a lot. And we have not recovered from that. I mean, 16th Street is—there's no reason why 16th Street has to be—

**MG:** The way it—

**AM:** Basically, as filthy and dirty as it is. All you have to do is send a guy with one of those little trucks, send that person every day and clean up the place, OK? Just clean everything—what's the big deal? But they don't. So, you have to wonder, what the hell do they have in the plans? And then some of our artist friends got commissions for the BART station, those beautiful cut outs.

**MG:** And [*cross talk*]

**AM:** Yeah, but it's like, hey, why don't you just clean up the place? That would do a lot for the aesthetics.

**MG:** And health. The health part of it's like, oh, God.

**AM:** So, those things have really deteriorated for our community. Of course now there are some more murals, more recognition.

**MG:** And better, nicer murals, actually.

**AM:** Yeah, there are very beautiful professional murals.

**MG:** Very, very beautiful murals.

**AM:** But for Balmy Alley—so I have a bone to pick with the city for Balmy Alley. Balmy Alley is like—OK, I guess it's kind of an open-air museum you could say. Why not? People from all over the world come to see it. There have been books written about it, constant articles about it, et cetera, et cetera.

But the city has done nothing to improve it. I mean, the foundation—or the road or whatever the hell—is still that ugly old asphalt with some broken—

**MG:** No, they kind of put bricks in. Yeah, that part is fine.

**AM:** But I think they should invest in that. There's no plaque, no recognition.

**MG:** I think we have to do the plaque.

**AM:** I think so—we have to push on them to do it. But I think it's like—I mean, it's a great site for community, for artists, because it keeps evolving; it's still evolving. But the city really doesn't pay much attention to it. At the Galería de Raza—you know, we worked at La Galería de la Raza. Mia worked in the shop. She's fabulous in terms of her taste for picking out merchandise and then arranging it. She's just got a talent that's amazing.

**MG:** It was fun.

**AM:** To do that. I worked there for a while doing PR—

**MG:** A PR person, but you did a good job there, though.

**AM:** Selling, trying to do this, the sale of artwork.

**MG:** Let me say—

**AM:** But that was also—it's an icon and we just lost that space. And the city maintained—I mean, you know, the city put money into it but not what it really deserves for the importance that that small gallery had.

**CG:** Mia, you were going to say something, and then they can ask you one question.

**MG:** One of the things that was really—about Galería—it was a good opportunity. And, again, because they did acknowledge the fact that they allowed that, not allowed, they gave that space to women, to have women shows. So they were kind of vanguards of many things.

One of the things that Ana had developed was we would have these artists—now we've evolved and we have kids now, but then. So [one] of the problems that was beginning to happen was that there was this growth of artists, primarily Chicana and Chicano artists, who were doing printmaking and silkscreens. But they didn't have an outlet.

So I think it was a collaboration between Ana and I, thinking, Well, why don't we make this wall and put their original work on the wall so there's access. And again, things having to do with access make a real big difference.

So Ana made a great thing about promoting the idea of having artists actually have an ability and a capability and a forum to sell their work. I mean, to see a Carmen Lomas Garza print on a wall?

We would have students coming for us as far away as Fresno—believe me, I know how far that is—to see this work. For them, it's as if they went to the museum and saw the original Picasso, van Gogh, but it was their contemporaries. They said, though, "Is that really a Carmen Lomas? Is that really a [*inaudible*]? Is that really a Juan Fuentes?" We go, "Yeah. And guess what? You can actually buy it."

So, you know, I think developing these various forums and in places for people to look at things and have access to them is very important. It doesn't exist now. But that is a very established artist, so they have their own Facebook, their Instagram.

**AM:** Yeah, their inspiration. And hopefully we'll see the Mexican Museum [again].

**MG:** Yeah, but it was launched through this. It was launched with Ana's thing, and working at Galería, and me being that person. Yeah, buy it, buy it, kind of stuff, so.

**CG:** I think something that if anything has become even more clear—because I think it had been clear talking to other people that we've talked to before you, me, and Ana—is the fact that not only were women at the forefront of this, and nonbinary folks; it's the amount of strategic intelligence and intelligences plural that you had that haven't been acknowledged. Because Balmy Alley is not only important for the Mission, not only important for San Francisco, it really became something that is recognized worldwide and that really pushed *muralismo* and murals to become the kind of art that is respected also in other parts of the world. But it started here. It really became the crux of so many things that you both have beautifully explained and your part in it.

And I just want you to acknowledge that importance. Because I feel like we've talked to enough people at this point, and it hasn't been as acknowledged as it should be. Because when you think of Balmy and you think of not only San Francisco but the importance of muralismo, it's thanks to Balmy, especially, that it became what it is. So let me just say that in case it wasn't something that you've heard enough. Because I would like to say that.



And I'll give now the mic to Myisa, who has a final question for the oral history. And then we can look at some photos—which would be fantastic—that you brought here.

**MP-G:** So my last question was just going to be in thinking about what you all were just kind of discussing a second ago, that there isn't any plaque. There isn't really very much the city has done to kind of memorialize the space in an "official capacity."

And so I'm just curious—I think my question is about legacy and how you think about that and how you think about what Balmy is today and the work that you did to create the space that exists today? And also just thinking about the importance of just legacy and visibility, I think, is what I'm thinking about too. And just having the community know that you two, along with other team members, did this work and be able to put faces to names—and also just thinking about like young women who are in this space, in Balmy Alley.

Knowing that women were at the foundation of the creation of this space. I think, from a visibility standpoint, if we're talking about "You can't be it if you can't see it." When we're thinking about legacy, obviously that's incredibly significant. And so, that wasn't really a question, but I think that's what I'm thinking of, and so I'd be curious to get your take on thinking about legacy in that way.

**MG:** Well, I think, I've actually had that thought about paying tribute to my—and this and now, a tribute to the women, pretty much the commanders who established Balmy Alley. And I've been thinking about it for a long time, and I've been thinking about what kind of plaque is it? I can deal with the city. I'm going to pay me and pay us to do what we're going to do. But I've been thinking about what it would be, what the image itself would be. And I thought, Well, do I do it in tile? So I've been already looking at that possibility. But I haven't done anything about it.

And it really has to remain, giving the gratitude to the women who walked up and down those stairs—to the women who were there on a day-to-day basis, working with kids and what we did for the sense and sensibility of the art and making the Balmy Alley the success that it is. It was our dream. It was my dream, but it was with the support of everybody, and then it became a mutual dream. And I think it's real important just to establish that, to put it on the wall. Because as the community becomes increasingly more gentrified, we are not having the ability to buy those homes there. A little house that maybe was \$50,000 is like a million [dollars now].

So our identity, of the people who actually started that, is beginning to disappear. And when I gave workshops these last two days, it was—I was happy to be in there, but it was kind of

noticeable to me, as well. And there's something on it I'm unfortunately starting to think about something. [*inaudible*] can imagine.

But I think a tribute—some kind of plaque. I'm not sure what has to be there. And I don't want to go through a lot of problems with that.

**AM:** I think it should be part of the history of the city.

**MG:** Exactly.

**AM:** Exactly. Contemporary.

**MG:** Yes, exactly.

**AM:** Yeah, I agree with you. I really had not thought about the fact that it was very much a women-based project. I don't know why that didn't occur to me. [*laughs*]

**MG:** I don't get it. I always thought that.

**AM:** Well, you know we were pretty open and cooperative with the Galería and René and some of the artists were male. But actually too—because 24th Street Place was very much female.

**MG:** It's all female.

**AM:** And we also caught some, we caught some—

**MG:** Flak.

**AM:** Some flak because of that too, in a way. In terms of just kind of, I hate to say it, but misogyny. There were some misogynist issues.

**MG:** You shouldn't hate to say it; it's exactly what—yeah.

**AM:** About that and that was kind of a weird feeling. [*laughs*] But.

**MG:** As we scratch our heads.

**AM:** So anyway. I guess because we're open-minded.

**MG:** Totally.

**AM:** And you know, but actually, yes, you're right. Because that's—Mujeres Muralistas was—

**MG:** They were born there.

**AM:** You know. Well, they were so; they were so dynamic. Of course, they were so talented and produced such beautiful work.

**MG:** Beautiful work

**AM:** Which right now, tragically, again, the first murals that they painted are no longer in existence. It was tragic 'cause they were beautiful. Very skilled. And they had more the tech; they had more, like, the authentic fresco technique for—I mean, it wasn't just painting on the walls. They actually were able to prepare—like Diego Rivera prepared his walls, right? And we've lost at least a couple of those.

**MG:** I just want to say, given that, exactly what she's saying, after we left—and we don't know how it got taken over, like who has made that decision to paint that out? And now that there's an attorney there who works for the art. It was unprotected, that body of work.

**AM:** Yeah, it was. At that time.

**MG:** At that time, art, murals on the wall, were unprotected. Now it's a whole thing. Now they're all protected. And when their mural got painted out, I think many of us either were not around or something. And we don't know who did it and why they did it. Because the mural that's there now, it's OK. But not great.

**AM:** I mean, that's what the city could do. That's something the city could do, and to hire—

**MG:** The city was not interested in it.

**AM:** Well, I'm saying now. To hire some of these very talented, let's say, the Mujeres Muralistas. The artists are still alive, for the most part, and to have them do more kind of professional work. That's an investment. They'd have to, you know—it's an investment and it would cost, it would [take some] resources. Not huge amounts of resources. But that's where I see that the city and the general society doesn't respect, really, the contribution that these artists have made.

**MG:** These women did.

**AM:** And these, yeah, these women artists have made. Whereas if maybe you are a man and you had a name or whatever, maybe it'd be different, right?

**CG:** Absolutely. I think that if anything.

**MG:** There's only one piece left and that—Irene's piece—is still there.

**CG:** That still says Irene's name too, and it's beautiful to look at it when we pass by Balmy. And all of these things you've been pointing at are the institutional powers that be making decisions on who gets money, when they make money.

And that's very important because—and I think we want to end this oral history with this question, which is, Balmy Alley's so special and the Mission is so special. Even the sounds of the bus as we're hearing it—it's just, we're in it. We're in the street, we're part of it, and it's so important to realize that Balmy is what has also made the Mission in San Francisco what it is, and to the world and seeing ourselves.

So I guess the last question, I'm going to ask it directly to Mia and then directly to Ana, is what is Balmy Alley or what does it mean to you? So let's start with Mia; let's go then with Ana.

**MG:** Balmy Alley for me means it gave me my rightful place of being a native San Franciscan, number one. It also gave me the rightful place to know that my family lived here in the Mission for a brief moment of time.

It gave me the rightfulness of a place of belonging and being. It also gave me a place to realize we need to make some kind of change here. Something's happening; I didn't know what it was. But I think my intuition was telling me that something's happening, something's changing, and I want to be a part of that change or create the change. And I think they didn't separate themselves, quite honestly. So in doing so, Balmy Alley was an opportunity to use both creative spirit, education, working with families, children, the community at large. And it made—again, once again—[it] really made a place for change.

I wanted to see that change in terms of a safe place, a place where families could come and enjoy [themselves] and feel comfortable.

I think maybe I was naive in some ways, but I guess I was a little optimistic. And it meant, again, it meant a place to make not my mark necessarily, but be a part of a community, to make a community more important and feel value of themselves within it. And I think that was important—that was important for me, yeah.

**CG:** That makes so much sense. And I don't think it was necessarily naive or optimistic. You have created it when you just—again, we just need institutional support. And it's good that this is a historical document that will be used if we wanted to make a case for it.

And speaking of making a case for Balmy Alley, and not only the aspects of your work in Balmy, but also beyond: Ana, as a lawyer, as a woman, as a Latina, as an El Salvadorena, part of the mission, even, what is Balmy to you? What does it mean?

**AM:** Yeah, so as I said that when we came to San Francisco we moved into an apartment on 24th Street. It's above like a little bar restaurant which was run by Puerto Rican folks there. And that's how my mom knew so much of the Puerto Rican community. And, as I said, she had a restaurant there on 24th Street next to Philz Coffee Shop. And we lived there for a number of years; the restaurant was there for a number of years. And so the place is important—the geography, as you were saying, 24th Street. Of course, by then, I was no longer a child. I was a young person. City College and all, a registered student.

And so I think of the Balmy Alley actually as a vortex of energy, you know, creative energy that somehow—I don't know. It's kind of magical in a way, that it's this vortex of energy in this alley just was so powerful and tremendous and it's still there.

I think that in terms of the initiation, let's say Mia, myself, and the women, *muralistas*, who I believe did their first mural there. I don't know, can you say, you gave birth to it?

**MG:** We gave birth to it. That was our baby. Our street and Balmy.

**AM:** Yeah and, of course, all the other people who came in. Like the kids and the artists, and the Galería, and who else was there?

**MG:** The dancers.

**AM:** Yeah, the dancers, the singers, the people who came to perform, Neighborhood Arts Center, the activists, the artists that were here in San Francisco at that time working at the art. All that kind of—the energies just kind of came in and somehow it's just concentrated, I feel. I mean, of course, all of the Mission with all its other vibrant arts and all of that and

everything that's happened. The *Carnaval* came afterwards, *Día de los Muertos* with René, more murals that have come into place. But somehow that vortex of energy I feel was so strong there after we started with the mural paintings and the performances. And it's just taken off. As I said, it's kind of magical in a way.

So that's what it means to me. And I hope that we continue. I think the artists are continuing to support it and the community continues to support it. I think politically we need to get that going too.

**MG:** Yeah, I think it needs to be—

**AM:** Politically and economically. You know after this COVID thing and where you shut down the whole world, you shut down the whole world. And then of course, you know, we had Trump, who was president. How can a man like that ever become president? But what I've learned is that—you know what? With our experiences, damn, anything is possible.

**MG:** Absolutely.

**AM:** Anything is possible. And when the city tells you, "Oh, no, we don't have money for this or that." What do you mean we don't have money? Of course we have. You can see it; you can see the spending. I mean, where did this money come from? And they're always coming up with new projects that they want to fund. Where's that money coming from?

So I think we have to even look at our society and our situation in a much even broader way and a much more open way. It's like a wake-up. We have to continue to wake up to see what's really going on around us.

**MG:** I think what's happening right now, because of COVID and how the world shut down, I think the sense of fear and poverty has gotten real difficult for people. And I don't know; I think people are still very afraid. The sense of community is real difficult with the exception of Roberto Hernández, who's done a tremendous job doing the Food Hub and things like that. But people wanting to put back—and his Carnaval. People wanting to put back in the way—what we did, I don't know that it could happen again like that. I don't think it could.

**AM:** Yeah, I think what you were saying about being young at the time, is that you do have a sense of freedom. And at that point when things were so moving here in the Mission, and there was that political and artistic activism, one did have a feeling of much more freedom. And I think society now doesn't feel as free.

**MG:** No.

**AM:** It feels actually quite closed. And so that's affecting us in certain ways. But as I said, how can you have the power to shut down the planet, basically what they did with the COVID pandemic, and what happened with the economy and money? What is money? You know, you're almost questioning it now. And why are our politicians telling us there is no money for—that's all I've heard my whole life. There's no money for this, there's no money for that, there's no money for education, there's no money for the arts. OK, but you know what's going on there you seem to have a lot of money to do all these things. In fact, I see no limit to the money that you have to distribute when you want it, the way you want to distribute it. So, hey, how about taking care of Balmy Alley? Well, they could start an endowment fund.

**MG:** Oh, I like that.

**AM:** They could do an endowment fund. An endowment fund to do more beautiful murals in the Mission, because you know the mission is very vibrant. It produces money for the city.

I mean, you get tourists coming here, you've got all your neighborhood eateries, you've got your bars. I mean, the Mission does produce money for the city. But I don't think we're getting the share of those profits that will uplift our community, that will beautify it, that will make it healthier, that would clean the streets on 16th Street and Mission. Even the BART station, come on. The BART station. What does it cost? Billions of dollars?

**MG:** To just run. No. I don't take any public transportation.

**AM:** Yeah, but I'm saying that I think our community is being cheated, big time. It's being cheated big time. It's not getting the revenue it needs to make it a beautiful place to live. It could be.

**MG:** Well, sense of pride, certainly.

**AM:** Yeah, and certainly the arts have made a huge contribution. So that's proven at this point. So we have to be careful not to take no for an answer, right? Get that youthful kind of, well, anything can be done. Not let the powers that be limit us in the ways that they are limiting us so much more and impinging on our freedom. And what we have is—we have our creativity, we have our minds, we have our experience, we have our knowledge.

**MG:** Yeah.

**CG:** I think that's a perfect note to end on. And you also were mentioning just possibility. Like if someone like Trump can be president, then the possibilities are actually endless.

**AM:** Hey, I could be president.

**CG:** Right?

**AM:** I wanna run!

**CG:** And that's an important thing; that's an important thing to acknowledge, that even all of these ideas that you're having, possibly an endowment, possibly talking to the city, and [the] city restoring, helping conserve some of these murals, these are possibilities that fortunately today, thanks to your trailblazing work, are clear, if they weren't clear before. And these will be used. As this oral history, it's a recollection of a lot of your stories, a lot of the things that you decided to share with us—which we're truly privileged to just be able to record them and hear them from you.

But this is a document. This is something that we can use to get that change. And just to finish, we wanted to thank you for sharing these stories and for your time.

Ana had brought some pictures for her and Mia to reminisce about their time being roommates and to remember how their friendship has endured since then. What follows is an audio record of what they showed Myisa and me.

**AM:** This is just—so [when] I was studying photography at the Art Institute, I took some pictures of Mia when we were roommates. And so, I was showing them to her.

**MG:** This is fun.

**AM:** I think we have a copy.

**MG:** I don't even know why I decided to put the clock on that stand.

**AM:** It's black and white.

**MG:** I guess it was fine.

**AM:** So this is the other. This is the other image.

**MG:** I look like a Mexican girl.



**AM:** You do?

**CG:** *Pero mira, tan lindo también* (But look, this is really cute too)

**AM:** You look like—you know, doesn't she look like, *¿cómo se llama?* (What's his name?) Wilde.

**MG:** Like wild?

**AM:** Oscar Wilde. Oscar. [*laughs*]

**MG:** Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**AM:** So these are just the same picture, just different exposures and what have you. I think this was my bedroom, huh?

**CG:** I was going to ask—you took it there when you were both roommates?

**AM:** Yeah, yeah. When we were—and it was my bedroom. It was a fab—

**MG:** It was a beautiful—the house we lived in is on 20th between York and Bryant. And the house, the front entrance of the house, from the street, is actually the back entrance.

**AM:** Was it a carriage house, Mia? Because it looks like it was a carriage house, though.

**MG:** It was moved from Best Foods Mayonnaise, at the time, on Bryant.

**AM:** Oh, it was moved?

**MG:** And they moved it from there, and they didn't know how to turn the house around. So this is a good spot, so they pushed it that way. So the back of the house is the front of the house. The front of the house is actually the back of it. And it has a huge—it's as tall as that, for carriages because it was for—

**AM:** I guess it was [for] horses.

**MG:** It was for horses. Yeah, it was a great place.

**AM:** I remember we used to have parties there. We used to have a lot of parties, and one time we bought—remember the beer keg? So somehow, I don't know.

**MG:** I don't remember that.

**AM:** Oh yeah, a beer keg, and then we didn't finish it, so we had that beer keg out there for weeks. And we were drinking it.

**MG:** We kept drinking it. It was working. It worked.

**AM:** We were like, yay!

**CG:** It kept working? [*laughs*]

**MG:** This is Ester Hernández.

**AM:** It was cold too.

**MG:** And René. And this is Ana in the back. Our glamour queen.

**AM:** Ester. This is the couple, the lesbian couple that we saw.

**MG:** This is Ester. Ester Hernández. She came as part of the group, eventually, with the Mujeres Muralistas.

**AM:** She was—she was in the art show, *Third World Women's Art* show.

**MG:** That's right. And our camera lady.

**AM:** Oh yeah, I didn't even recognize myself. [*cross talk*] Oh, no, it's me. I remember the outfit.

**MG:** Of course you did.

**AM:** I wore that thing.

**MG:** This is an artist who came much later, when we worked all together at Galería de la Raza. And extraordinary art. You had something about—to tell me about her.

**AM:** Oh. Eva. Wait, wait a minute. Don't you have a picture of her work?

**MG:** This is one of them.

**AM:** Eva was the sister of Lorraine, who was the director of the Mexican Museum for a few years. And this is kind of her artwork. She was a fabulous chalk—

**MG:** Chalk artist. Unfortunately, she had passed away. And so this is one of the pieces I did.

**AM:** Yeah, she died real young.

**MG:** At the Arts Commission. And she did a big star on the sidewalk, and I did a star on her star with the miracle flowers. But she was an extraordinary artist.

**CG:** It's a beautiful altar. Like having your friends, that's an [*cross talk*] part of also both of your works. When you were doing your *Encantada*, that was such an important part of your heritage.

**AM:** Yeah. Yeah. Mia's an extraordinary altar maker.

**MG:** These I like. I really like these because she always worked on a ladder, always.

**AM:** Yes, that's right. And you know so.

**MG:** So I did her ladder.

**AM:** What Galería—I think Galería did it after the Balmy Alley, where they took over the Foster sign and they started painting a mural there for every new exhibition. That went on for years, and Eva painted many of those exhibition murals.

**MG:** And [the billboard company] eventually surrendered that. They kept coming and painting them up, painting them up, and then we would paint over, paint over, and do it again, do it again. And then they said, "Oh."

**AM:** "We're tired."

**MG:** "You can have it." [*laughs*] So this is, you showed them that one, right? So this is one of the women; this is Martha Estrella. And she was part of the 24th Street women clan. And those are actually some of the kids who are grown up, because we try to do a little memory lane with that. And all of those grown-up kids have their children.

**AM:** Yeah, they already have children.

**MG:** Yeah, so that was in the Balmy Alley.

**CG:** Balmy. Balmy Alley

**MG:** Balmy Alley.

**CG:** It's just incredible to see those specifically beautiful smiling faces and then the heritage that they were able to see in Balmy but also just passing by it and what you did with your organization. It's just—it's just incredible that you have that also as a document, as a record.

**AM:** They're part of that history. I mean, the kids were. Definitely.

**MG:** Yeah.

**AM:** I mean, we were drawing and painting.

**MG:** I think I now have many more photographs.

**CG:** I was gonna say that scarf is fantastic—

**AM:** The boa.

**CG:** The boa. [*inaudible*]

**AM:** I think it was purple?

**MG:** It was purple.

**CG:** Oh, on top of that, it's purple.

**MG:** Let me put this one on, yeah, yeah, whatever. [*laughs*] What happened in Balmy Alley too, because of the music. This was the beginning, where Malo, a very well-known—

**CG:** Oh, my god. When we talked to Mike Ríos, he was playing guitar.

**AM:** Oh, Mike?

**MG:** Oh yeah, good old Mike.

**CG:** It was just incredible. And we were listening to like, very old Malo records.

**AM:** He's been—

**MG:** He's been—he had a stroke.

**CG:** Yeah, he's still—but he's getting better.

**AM:** But he was a musician then.

**MG:** Then, yeah.

**CG:** He considers himself also a musician, which was a nice thing when we talked to him. But it's just, the kind of beautiful music. I bet Malo just did that too. You know, the guitar. The strumming. Those *tambores*. Those congas. Those timbales. Incredible.

**MG:** Yeah, he's multitalented. So when Malo was just developing, they played music in the alley. So we're, oh, yay! [*laughs*] We were very flattered.

**AM:** Let's get Santana! I think we tried.

**MG:** We tried, but he was always touring so we couldn't. But our other friend was Taj Mahal.

**CG:** Right.

**AM:** Hey, Mongo Santamaría.

**MG:** And Mongo Santamaría. So Taj would come to 24th Street Place. Tall man. And then he'd come in and we'd go, hey. We were like, all like starstruck. And after a while we got over it, and he would just come in and he would just play his kalimba. We'd go, OK, go ahead and sit with it, Taj, we're just busy now. Coolest person ever. And then we had Mongo Santamaría. I don't know how that happened but he came [*cross talk*] and Abaya. You got a little crush on her.

**AM:** Oh, really?

**MG:** Yeah

**AM:** He was my best friend.

**MG:** And then they came to 24th Street Place, and that was fun too. And then they came to when we have this fabulous house on 20th Street and he brought his band.

**AM:** Yeah, to one of the parties. [*laughs*]

**MG:** Yeah, and he made the party, actually. He played music and we were like, this is fun.

**AM:** This is nice.

**MG:** We have a great time, this is nice.

**CG:** That is just beautiful. And it's just like, you're referring to Mike and them as multitalented. [*cross talk*] Excuse me, you both are multitalented.

**AM:** Thank you,

**CG:** It's not to—you know, it's not enough to just do 24th Street. You then did Encantada. Then you became a lawyer, Ana. It's incredible all of these talents and intelligences that you also have. That's why the community is what it is today.

**AM:** You know what, no, I don't think I'm unique [in] that. I would like to see more of that developing.

**CG:** I'm with you. It's not unique, but it's because we also don't tell ourselves that we can inspire people to do all those things.

**AM:** Yeah, and we need encouragement. And we need that support. I mean, if you look at all the mostly famous people and whatever, it's because they have gotten, it's— you don't just do it on your own.

**MG:** Never.

**AM:** You know, you need that societal support. Otherwise you're basically marginalized, yeah? Because we all know lots of beautiful, talented people. Yeah, we didn't talk much about the Mission Cultural Center, but that came after.

**MG:** Oh, yeah. Yeah. That was a big struggle, but it was a good one.

**AM:** Yeah. That one worked well, and that should be, that's—the city has, the Arts Commission has supported that for—

**MG:** Yeah, they get money and hotel tax money?

**AM:** Yeah, that was a source of funding. So, yeah, that was good.

**MG:** So we did go on. I mean, I got picked up by, picked up with Ruth Asawa.

**AM:** Ruth Asawa.

**MG:** And we worked at—remember? She liked what we were doing. And then it was where we lost our funding. And she said, “Oh come work with me.” So, OK. I worked at Alvarado Arts.

**CG:** That did happen.

**MG:** It did happen, yeah.

**CG:** That is incredible because sometimes what I heard is that Ruth did know of some of this, but it's—these are the little parts that we didn't know about the history. That's important.

**AM:** Well, you worked with her at the school district.

**MG:** Yeah, I worked with the school district.

**AM:** You had a—when you got a job there after 24th Street.

**MG:** After 24th Street, yeah. So they—and I was able to get a contract and work with them. And they wanted me to work with them. And then I worked with—oh, man, that was a big project. I loved it. It was—what exactly was their name? San Francisco Arts, Youth Arts Program. And what it was, it was a huge event to have an art exhibit of children's art in Golden Gate Park and at the de Young Museum. And that was—

**AM:** Oh, yeah. You worked on that.

**MG:** Yeah, I worked on that. That was phenomenal.

**AM:** The refrigerator.

**MG:** Oh, plug in the fridge!

**MP-G:** Oh, good thinking.

**CG:** Oh, yeah.

**AM:** Can you imagine if we forgot? [*cross talk*]

**MG:** It's not on? We'll never get that heat, never again.

**AM:** Yeah, you'll never. So Mia, *quédate tú con estas* (you keep these)

**MG:** Oh thank you, thank you.

**AM:** You might be able to make a collage with it. I did that a lot with those. By cutting them out.

**MG:** I did this one; I think you gave me one. And I put this little decal of a donkey or burro with a serape and I really liked it. I was like, yeah, I like that.

**AM:** I've been working on a lot of framing things, reframing them and trying to find—

**MG:** Well, I'm ready to come and see your things now.

This oral history of Mia Gonzalez and Ana Montano was a collaborative effort, like murals also are. The team behind it was:

**ERICA GANGSEI:** Erica Gangsei

**MP-G:** Myisa Plancq-Graham

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

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

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

**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.

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Thanks for listening.