This is an oral history of muralist and artist Carlos “Kookie” Gonzalez for the Mission Murals Project. I'm Camilo Garzón. It was recorded on June 11, 2021, in Carlos’s studio garage in his home in San Bruno, California. The voices you’ll hear will be those of Carlos and me, and there’s a short appearance from his dog, Chico, [whose speed Carlos describes] as “qué corre el cabrón.” (a fast bastard)

You’ll also hear some airplanes and garbage trucks throughout the oral history, sounds of the neighborhood, that especially on a Friday don’t let you sleep long, Carlos told me. Just before we started the oral history, a delivery truck parked in front of Carlos’s home and Carlos and the delivery person talked about music and even discussed a potential gig with local band Mambo Street.

Inside of the garage, we were surrounded by his drums, congas, an ofrenda full of pictures of friends and family, as well as multiple prints of murals he had worked on and other pieces of art and keepsakes. Among the tchotchkes there was a Chewbacca head with sunglasses and a baseball hat with the words “Mission Knows” printed on it.

This oral history delves into Carlos’s life and upbringing in the Mission District that led to his career as an artist and probation officer, including how he got himself in juvenile hall and what his first encounter with murals [was] as part of his community-mandated work. He also talks about his friendship and work with muralists Susan Cervantes, Michael Ríos, and Ray Patlán; his recent diagnosis of cancer; the importance of music in his life; his current projects after retirement; and his feelings on being evicted from the Mission District.

Here is the oral history.

Esta es una historia oral del muralista y artista Carlos «Kookie» Gonzalez para el Mission Murals Project. Soy Camilo Garzón. Se grabó el 11 de junio de 2021, en el garaje-estudio de Carlos en su casa en San Bruno (California). Las voces que oirás serán las de Carlos y la mía, y aparece brevemente su perro, Chico, [cuya rapidez describe Carlos] como «que corre el cabrón».

También oirás algunos aviones y camiones de basura durante la historia oral: sonidos del vecindario que no dejan dormir hasta muy tarde los viernes, según me dijo Carlos. Momentos antes de que comenzáramos la historia oral, una camioneta de entregas se estacionó frente a la casa de Carlos, y Carlos platicó con el repartidor acerca de música y hasta hablaron de una posible actuación con Mambo Street, una banda local.
Dentro del garaje, estábamos rodeados de sus tambores, congas, una ofrenda llena de fotos de amigos y familiares, así como varias impresiones de murales en los que había trabajado y otras obras de arte y objetos de recuerdo. Entre las chucherías había una cabeza de Chewbacca con gafas de sol y una gorra de béisbol impresa con las palabras «Mission Knows».

Esta historia oral ahonda en la vida y crianza de Carlos en el Mission District que lo condujeron a su profesión como artista y agente de libertad condicional, incluyendo la manera en la que llegó a meterse en la correccional de menores y cuál fue su primer encuentro con los murales como parte de su trabajo comunitario obligatorio. También habla de su amistad y trabajo con los muralistas Susan Cervantes, Michael Ríos y Ray Patlán; su diagnóstico reciente de cáncer; la importancia de la música en su vida; sus proyectos actuales después de la jubilación; y sus sentimientos acerca de ser desalojado del barrio de la Mission.

Aquí está la historia oral.

CAMILO GARZÓN: Now, OK, so, today is June 11, 2021, and I’m very pleased that Carlos “Kookie” Gonzalez is here with me and he welcomed me in his home in San Bruno, California. I’m talking to him on behalf of the Mission Murals Project. So if you can just say your full name and where were you born?

CARLOS “KOKIE” GONZALEZ: Carlos “Kookie” Gonzalez, and I was born in San Francisco, raised in the Mission District.

CG: What do you remember of your upbringing in the Mission District?

CKG: Oh, boy! I grew up in a neighborhood at a time—in the early sixties I was in elementary school and that was a turbulent time—because I remember watching the Vietnam War. I remember the assassinations of Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers. John F. Kennedy—I was four years old when he got killed. I vaguely remember that, but I definitely remember Robert Kennedy, watching the Vietnam War, and all the movements—the UFW, farmworkers’ movement.

I was influenced a lot by the Brown Berets and the Black Panthers growing up. Street culture in the Mission District was a fact of life. Growing up outside, all the little vagos (lazies) that my parents didn’t want me to hang out with are the ones I went and hung out with. They were my neighbors; they’re the kids down the block. They were all my buddies.
And so, I went to Catholic School and my parents thought that sending me to Catholic School would keep me from delinquency, and it was kind of like the opposite. Most of [the] delinquents went to Catholic School [laughs]. It's kind of funny, 'cause it's basically where we grew up.

But a lot of the movements, the music in the Mission was, it was like the psychedelic era, the hippie movement—Jefferson Airplane, Fillmore West was happening, Tower of Power, Santana, Malo. A lot of Latin-infused music was happening, and as I was growing up, I was being influenced by it. Conga players in Dolores Park—we used to go play tackle football and baseball in the park, [and] my parents would say, “No se juntan con esos pinches greñudos marihuano” (Don’t hang out with those damn disheveled stoners). And they were the ones playing congas, and all these pretty girls.

So, we'd be playing, man, we're like eleven, twelve, thirteen years old, and these guys were like older teenagers and young adults partying, drinking, smoking, playing drums. And that really—I go, “Man, I want to learn how to play congas 'cause that's how you get girls.” And so, as soon as I became a teenager, I started hanging out with drummers and learning how to play music. I wanted to play drums. So my uncle bought me a drum set. And that's how my music career kind of started off.

But as far as my art career as a kid, I was always a natural artist. My father noticed it. And my father was a mariachi; he played traditional Mexican music, trío music. See, there’s a picture of my father right there, right behind you up on that little altar area behind the Virgen.

**CG:** Do you mind describing it?

**CKG:** Yeah, it's a picture of him with his Trío Veracruz and they're all in their charro (cowboy) outfits, and they played all over. I remember my father coming home [at] three, four in the morning, his friends bringing him in, dragging him to the door, knocking on the door, and leaving him there all borracho (drunk) and stuff [laughs].

But my dad was a good influence, aside from the music and all that. He noticed that I could draw at an early age, at first, second, third grade. He noticed I had a knack for it, so he always wanted a drawing for him when he got home from work. I'd get home from school at three o'clock; the first thing I start doing is drawing a picture for him so I can go out and play. He didn't care about homework. So, the minute he got home, like around four thirty, like clockwork, I'd have a drawing for him. He'd look at it—"OK, cabrón, vete a jugar. (OK, asshole,
go play.)” I didn’t have to do homework; he didn’t care about homework. And my mom, through all those years—from elementary school through high school, I had all these drawings that she collected, and the different interests that I had. I was mostly [interested in] sports figures when I was a kid, like the Giants and Willie Mays and Willie McCovey, and the 49ers and the Raiders.

And then as I got a little bit older, I started liking girls, so I started doing nudes. And then when I started getting high—when I was about twelve, thirteen, I started smoking weed, and everything was psychedelic. And it was influenced by the Fillmore West rock posters. Everything was like blowing up, melting. My mom saved all those.

But eventually, my father, he got deported back to Mexico. Little did we know, he had a whole ’nother family in México, my father. And I met my other half brothers and sisters eventually, but he never came back. And when my father left, all that discipline that I had—I was afraid of him. I ran wild on the streets and I got caught up in the streets, got in trouble, got arrested—stealing cars, breaking into places, running with my friends, selling drugs. And eventually I wound up getting locked up at juvenile hall twice. In ’73 for auto theft, and then in ’76 for weapons. And they dropped the charges, but I was put on probation.

And part of my punishment for probation was community service. And the community service was working with muralists in the Mission. So my knack for drawing, it kind of developed as I worked with these muralists. You know, cleaning brushes or telling me to paint, “OK, paint in this square here, paint just blue.” Or “Do this.”

And then, I started learning how they mixed colors and how they made their palettes. And I just watched and watched. And eventually that and music kind of like changed my direction in life. Instead of, like—we’d get into these gang fights, right? And we’d like say, “OK, all these fucking dudes from Daly City going to meet us at Dolores Park. Be there.” And I had a gig. It was either go make money playing music or go take a chance at getting beat up or hurting somebody.

And that—but my friends understood that. They didn’t say I’m a chicken. And I kept thinking, Oh, man, if I don’t go I’m gonna be a coward, you know, they’re going to fucking beat my ass for not going. But eventually my friends understood that I had a different path. And a lot of my friends wound up going to prison and everything. And we took—we parted ways. [airplane engine roars] There goes a plane, so I guess [that’s] what I was talking about. [laughs] Living by the airport, man.

CG: It’s OK. So you were just saying then eventually you parted ways?
CKG: One foot in, one foot out, 'cause I was—I could never leave my homies, you know, and hang out, get high, party. There was always parties to play, but then I wound up playing in bands [and] we’re playing at the parties.

CG: So you were, like, in between multiple worlds. It was just a matter of like, “I was here with them first.” And then it’s like, “I ended up in the arts and then the arts brought me back here, but in a different way.”

CKG: And then my friends and everyone, “You got to play again, your band sounds good, bro!” We’d get hired for parties and backyards. Then, when I was about fifteen, I was already playing in nightclubs with adults. And I was playing congas with some bands, and we’d play at places like El Señorial, Bay Jones—these are all nightclubs that were popular in the seventies. And I’d have to sit in the car during breaks, ‘cause I couldn’t be inside the bar. But I was being influenced, cocaine was happening, and I grew up fast. But I eventually left the street life for a musician-/artist-type life.

CG: Which was, if you think of it—it’s kind of funny that we still call it like street life, when it’s like muralism, for example. You still—it’s art in the streets. It’s like art publicly accessible. It’s for the people; it’s not mediated. It’s not like you need to go somewhere, you need to do this thing. It’s like, no, I’m like, in the street just like, walking and then there’s this piece of art that is a part of like the environment at this point.

CKG: Exactly, and one of the things that helped politicize me was one of the agencies that helped advocate for me when I was going through court was named the Real Alternatives Program. And the Real Alternatives Program was established in 1969 as a program to advocate for youth who were getting locked up. And they would actually use the youth that they advocated for and employ them, and teach them how to community organize, how to be active in politics, and how to politicize youth to see that it’s the Man that wants you to get locked up—it’s like a tracking system.

Some kids are going to go in the educational system; others are going to the pipeline of prison. And I started learning how things worked politically and in the bigger scheme of things. And I became somewhat politicized and started working for the agency that saved me from the court system. And I became a counselor, and I wound up working in all the components. They had a drug component, drug program. They had an outreach program where we’d go break up gang fights and work Friday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday nights, from eight to two in the morning, and we drove around in vans and [laughs].

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CG: Who’s that over there?

CKG: Is that Chico, my doggy?

CG: It’s probably Chico.

CKG: Anyways, we’d go around to all the hot areas, and if we knew there was going to be some tension, we’d go and mediate. And if homies were intoxicated—’cause angel dust was real popular in the eighties—we would have crates of cranberry juice and milk, ’cause that would take the effect off. And then we’d get them before the cops got them and take them home. And then those cats eventually became clients and eventually wound up working.

And we would work with the people nobody else wanted to work with—the dropouts, the gang kids, kids who were in and out of juvenile detention, and who were like wards of the court, dependents of the court—because every other social agency that tried to work with them failed. And we were the only ones, and we made those guys soldiers—like, politicized community organizers. And that’s what got me into college. And when I got into college I joined MEChA, and then I transferred to San Francisco State.

CG: What is MEChA, for anyone that doesn’t know Spanish?

CKG: MEChA is Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán, and it was a student movement whose main goal was to educate youth on Latin American, primarily Chicano, history. And our main objective was to recruit kids into college from the streets, through the EOP [Educational Opportunity Program], and bring them in.

And we would have career days. We would have college awareness days when we’d go to all high schools in the barrio and go to the kids who were at—Black kids, Latino kids, Asian kids, Polynesian kids, any kid of color, or even white kids who wanted to come to college that were poor, poor white kids. And we’d bring them to college for one day and [take] them around the campus. And [we’d] show them that there’s something here for you.

CG: It’s just so great of an acronym of like, un inicialismo (initialism), because mecha also in Spanish, outside of what you just described, is la mecha (the wick). It’s what you use to bring a fire.

CKG: Like the fire, yeah, yeah.
CG: Like without a spark, you literally create a spark for all of these youth to just like, “Hey, you can do this. You were here for a day.” “Look at me, I have done it too.” [dog whimpers] Oh, look at Chico!

CKG: Chico, shhh! Be cool.

CG: [laughs] Jumping up and down! When you think of all of those—let’s call it social activism, right? That’s what we call it these days, even back then. It’s just a matter of understanding your place in society, but also doing something about the people around you.

CKG: Right!

CG: And you didn’t care who it was; it was just like they happen to need help. “I also got help and I want to help.” How do you think you also engaged this kind of like social activism, also in your mural work or in your artwork?

CKG: Well, that was a natural transition. I mean, ’cause we—it was actually the other way around, the art, because I was learning with masters, you know—Ray Patlán, Mike Ríos—[and] they are already giving the political message. No US in—US out of El Salvador, US out of Central America, no police oppression, stop police brutality. Those are messages I went into college with already because I was forced by the court to work with these fucking guys.

And so, it all fell in; it all meshed naturally. And by the time I got to college, it was only reinforced because I was an ethnic studies major. I started off as an industrial art major, [and] then I went to the art department. But at the time, if you weren’t wearing black and mod or just a fucking weirdo, they ostracized you in the art department. I felt like a stranger in the art department because I was expressing my Chicano art. The art I was—I was already fucking painting murals making money when these fucking students—all wearing black and distanced and weirdos. During critiques, even the teachers said bad things about my art.

CG: What would they say?

CKG: Just criticisms, like little slights and shit, you know, because I missed the theme of the assignment. I don’t get what they’re saying. So you know what, I switched to ethnic studies. I said [thud sound] toma (screw you) to the art department. I’m already doing it anyway.

CG: It’s just so fascinating, because you and I, we happen to be Latinos. I’m Colombian American. You’re Chicano. OK, fine. But at the end of the day in the States, this is just something that is familiar to most of us in different environments. It’s not even just about

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art; it’s just like, you have this assignment, you need to do this thing. You probably were still doing the assignment to an extent, it just happened to be using iconography that they probably didn’t like or, like, something that is not considered to be hard.

And at the end of the day, I’m sitting here with you, behind you [there is] a painting, a canvas, where you have congas and *calaveras* (skulls), and it’s just—how is that not art? How is that not an expression of culture, of what you care about?

**CKG:** They’re using value judgments, basically, against me. And I was just trying to conform to whatever they were trying to teach. And it was so frustrating that I said, “You know what? I really don’t—I’m having more fun expressing myself.” And I wanted a formal art training, I did. I really wanted to learn how to classically oil paint and how to do traditional stuff, but it felt like I was being rejected from the department I wanted to learn from the most.

And all along I was meant to be a community activist. And I transferred from Sonoma State to San Francisco State. And San Francisco State didn’t have a MEChA [chapter]; they had a La Raza student organization. Because it was more of a mix of Latin American, Central American, and Chicano and Mexican students. So MEChA was just—didn’t fit the bill. And so La Raza was all-encompassing, like [José] Vasconcelos’s [book] *La raza cósmica*. And it encompassed all of us. We’re everything; we’re a little bit of everything.

And so, that’s when La Raza studies came in, and I finished. I met Carlos Córdova, a lot of—Roberto Rivera, Carlos Barón—and it just opened my eyes. And the participation with La Raza—and we did the same thing that MEChA did here: college awareness days, going out to the high schools, bringing kids in. And, you know, it really—and at the same time I was working at the Real Alternatives Program, working in the community, working on the front lines in the streets. And we were doing mural projects with all these kids in the streets, and gangs and everything. And that eventually gave me the experience to apply to be a probation officer.

And the agency rep, the executive director, was good friends with Nelba Chavez—who eventually went out to work in the Bill Clinton administration in Washington, after Bill Clinton got elected—and [she] was able to put me in there, in the probation department, in 1990. And I wound up doing the same thing there with all my connections in the community—with Bayview Hunters Point, with Sonia West in the Fillmore, Instituto Familiar de la Raza, rap.

I had all the resources—more so than any other probation officer. Because I was working on the streets with the kids that were getting sent over there! And I used to get sent there! *[laughs]*
And that was—one of the funniest things is the guy that was my probation officer when I was a teenager, he was retiring the year I became a probation officer. And my very first office was right next to his. His name was Charles Rand. He’s an archaeologist now. He retired. I don’t know if he’s still alive or what, but when I saw him, “Hey! You used to be my PO!” “Cause he went to introduce himself, “Welcome to, this is the, if you need, have any questions.” And I just told him, “You don’t remember me, huh?” He didn’t remember me, but he remembered a lot of my homies. And I go, well, it’s good that he didn’t remember me, ’cause I wasn’t that bad!

So yeah, I went full circle there, and wound up doing a twenty-five-year career in probation. And throughout that time, I moonlighted doing artwork and did murals. I did a mural at juvenile, the juvenile detention center. I wound up doing a couple of mural projects with gang kids, in the Mission, one of which recently got torn down, the 24th York Street mural was a Cesar Chavez mural, and that one I painted with Ray Patlán in 1985.

**CG:** Which used to be called *Y tú, yo, y qué*, and then you participated and it got called *Y tú, yo, y Cesar*.

**CKG:** *Y Cesar*, yeah. And that’s when I painted it. Ray gave me the wall [and] said, “Do it!” I was already a probation officer. And we kept the same theme format, but we just made different people. I put more cultural icons like Cesar Chavez.

**CG:** You picked Dolores Huerta too!

**CKG:** Dolores Huerta. And Dolores Huerta came towards the end, before it got torn down, because the Farm Workers ‘eagle, Cesar Chavez, was adopted by a Norteno (Northern) prison gang, Con Nuestra Familia (With Our Family). There’s a Mexican Mafia, Nuestra Familia; they’re both prison gangs that represent. Northern California’s represented by Nuestra Familia, [and] Southern California Chicanos are represented by the Mexican Mafia, constantly fighting. But it spilled out onto the streets, into the local street gangs.

And as migration patterns moved north, a lot of Sureños (Southern) moved up north and were living—so they were naturally fighting each other here. And so, whenever a Sureño in San Francisco would see the Farm Workers ‘eagle, they’d cross it out. And they put the puto—it’s called a puto mark—and they’d cross it out. And then put their dirty—and then we crossed you out. 16th Street Locos—whatever. So they kept crossing it out; they didn’t get the symbolism behind the Farm Workers [logo] because a prison gang had adopted it.
**CG:** Look at that, it’s just like one symbol that is like very clear in this context in San Francisco. In San—just like, around here, it ended up being thought of, or like received—

**CKG:** We all marched with Cesar when he would boycott grapes on Market Street. He came—he was marching here since ’64, ’65, when Robert Kennedy—he even came out here! So, you know—but these kids, the historical concept, they don’t get it, because a lot of these kids are immigrant kids. And to them, an American-born like me isn’t—I’m not really Mexican. I’m a *pocho.* And here, I’m not really American, ’cause I’m a fucking Mexican. You’re caught in the middle, and that’s how our Chicanismo developed. Because we’re not here nor there, but we’re here. This is us. And we developed our own language, our own style: low-riding, Chicanismo, the tattoos, the caló, the way we talk and walk. We’ve developed our own style.

And so, that was another dynamic that these youngsters that were coming newly immigrated—they didn’t give a fuck. To them we’re just Norteños, so they crossed it out. So after repairing that mural at least four or five times, we finally decided [to] put Dolores Huerta on there and cover the eagle. So we put it next to Cesar, and that’s how that came about.

And then the owner of the building decided, “Well, I’m going to retire. I need to sell the building and build condos there so I can rent it out and live my life out with positive income.” We fought them for two [or] three years on that, and eventually the planning commission told us, “Hey, man, it’s his property; you really can’t do nothing about it.”

**CG:** What did you have to do when that happened? I heard from Ray Patlán about it, but also even Mission Local and other outlets that are—journalism outlets in San Francisco—reported back that you had to just not only take it down, but you decided to do something very specific. There were still certain mementos, certain things that—keepsakes, let’s say—from the mural that you decided to give to the community. Why did you decide to do that?

**CKG:** We cut it all in pieces. So what happened was, the owner, Johnny Jabra [Muhawieh]—I knew him growing up because [of] his parents; he’s Palestinian. He’s a good dude, man. And I think his own personal interest of retiring and being financially secure outweighed his love for the community, basically. And he had to do what he had to do, but Johnny was willing to kind of compromise. And we held them off for two years from getting his permits to demolish it, and we [were] just a fly in the ointment. We were like, you know, we’re just delaying and delaying. But eventually we knew we couldn’t stop it.

But Johnny Jabra agreed, in writing—we got lawyers—agreed to, when he tears it down, the new building, he’s going to give me the mural. I’m going to be able to paint a mural on the
new building, so I'm going to keep it. But it's going to be a smaller mural because of the building. We saw the drawings.

And so, right before they started demolishing, I decided to see about, well, maybe we can cut out each of the panels. And Johnny Jabra was really cool about it, and he got the demolition contractor to work with us. And I did a GoFundMe account and raised—I think it was about $5,000. Because we had to pay for the—'cause it's stucco, and it's like concrete. It's like this thick. And each panel weighed about four hundred pounds when you cut it out of the wall. It's not just you cut it out and carry it. It's concrete with wood backing—stucco concrete—and then the surface layer, and then painting on top.

So we were able to get a crew. And I paid the crew to cut them all out, and I donated some to—Malcolm X and Nelson Mandela—and I think one more went to the Tenderloin Art Symposium. They're out there right in the middle of the Tenderloin. They're on permanent display. Then I had Pancho Villa—I actually put my father, the Mariachis went into that mural, and that image we cut out. And then an image of a friend of mine’s parents ‘wedding.

We cut those three, and they're going to be on permanent display at Casa Phoenix on 1950 Mission, where I used to work with rap. It used to be Marshall School. And now my art is going to be on permanent display, and then I did this for them. They contracted me to do this image of the phoenix rising from the ashes. And so, I did this and they have three of my panels housed at the new location in the courtyard—permanently.

And then the other panels, I gave—the Cesar Chavez is on 24th [near] Bryant, at Tio Chilos restaurant. I don't know if you been there. But we cut him out. And then I gave Dolores Huerta to Roberto Hernandez, who was instrumental in a lot of this stuff, and he does the Mission Food Bank; he does Carnaval. Actually, I did this for Carnaval 2017. That was for this poster.

And so we gave it—and then a couple other ones I gave to private persons who helped me get photographs of their relatives that I had put in the mural. And so I gave it all out to the community. So that way it's preserved somewhere, even though the building's torn down. And then I'm going to get to paint a new mural on the new building.

**CG:** When are you going to do that?

**CKG:** Whenever they build it. Right now it's still an empty lot. So I don't know if he's working on getting—he has architectural drawings. So maybe he's working on getting the permits to
start construction, but they haven’t started yet. It’ll probably be in about two, three years. So I know I got another mural in the future to do.

So whether he’s going to pay us for it, or [we’ll] have to raise the money—I’m sure we could get a grant to pay for it and do the new one, because he agreed to it. So the owner was pretty cool and open to it, but eventually the planning commission said, “That’s his property. You can’t stop him.” And so he won and, but we—he compromised with us, and that was a cool thing.

So he, in the eyes of the community, he kind of like redeemed himself a little bit. Because he was a villain. Everyone wanted to beat his ass. And the corner store—he owned a couple, [and] another laundromat across the street from the corner store. He had a corner store on 24th and Alabama. No, 23rd and Alabama. And that was a famous store. It was called Jabra’s; his father owned it. And he grew up, and then he wound up opening laundromats as a result of his father’s hard work. And so people will go by there and kinda tag it [with] “Assholes.” But it wasn’t cool, so we put a stop to that. But eventually he redeemed himself. [laughs.]

**CG:** It’s just so many forces, so many different decisions, but the good thing is at the end of the day, you are able to still—it was something you gave to a community, because that’s what that mural was, right? You’re representing even members of the community, which is something that doesn’t often happen necessarily in other forms of art. Like you were going out of your way: “Hey, *primo* (cousin), do you want to get here?” Or: “*Cuate, güey amigo* (buddy, my friend), *quieres* do you want to be here?” And the grandma would be there, [and] the cousin would be there.

**CKG:** And the whole neighborhood was part—and that was one of the murals that I did with gang members from that area, the York Street/Hampshire Street Boys. A lot of those—during the time we were painting that, one of the guys went around the corner to go take a leak, [and] he wound up getting shot. We didn’t know he got shot till we saw the ambulances coming—and ’cause we were like, “What the fuck! He left all his paints here! What the fuck! Where is he?” Next thing you know [*makes siren sounds*], and he’s laid out on the floor—he got shot! On the corner!

Another time, one of my guys who is under surveillance, the cops just came and arrested him right while we’re painting, just [*rumbling sounds*], “What happened?” [*mumbles*] “He was wanted, and he got arrested.”

And so, that was the kind of thing. And then, Johnny Jabra, who owned the laundromat while we were doing that—that was the summer of 1995. A lot of the kids would hang out there.
’cause it was a gang hangout. So they’d be playing music and scaring all his customers from going a lavar ropa (to wash clothes) [laughs]. They’re like going around the long way to go in the front because they’re all hanging out, watching this paint and dadadada. And finally Johnny Jabra goes, “Hey, man, if they’re going to be playing music, don’t block the sidewalk. Let my customers come in and out.”

So, we had to deal with those kinds of dynamics, and because I was a probation officer, cops that would come by that didn’t know I was a probation officer, would harass us, and then I’d have, “Hey, wait, wait, hold on! Officer, what’s going on?” And then, “I’m the lead artist.” And they’d go, “Well, do you have any ID?” And I’d flash my badge. “I’m a probation officer. I’m working with these gang kids.” You know, “Oh. Oh, oh, OK.” I go, “Don’t worry, I got it covered, man, it’s all good.” Click, and then they—then the word got around, and we wound up finishing the mural with the knuckleheads, and we had a big dedication ceremony. And the rest is history, man.

And working with that population of kids, some of them—one of them right now is a great tattoo artist, and he has a business. He’s partners with the skate shop—the skateboard shop on 24th Street called SF Mission, right there. Mission Skateboard right there on Treat, between Treat and Harrison, that’s—he’s a partner in it. And a couple other guys went on to do their own thing and sell art and paint, and still do their own little private commissions.

So it does save lives, you know. I mean, not everybody, but in one way or another, art and music save lives, man.

**CG:** Which is just an interesting argument that you hear sometimes, about just art being like a distraction, or like it’s [taking] you out of life. And if anything, it keeps you alive. It definitely helps you be in other kinds of things. And you also had some experiences that they also had, so they also saw someone that was like, Oh yeah, I also been incarcerated. Right? I have had to do things, at the end of the day—look at me. I am still able to do this.

And the full circle that you just described earlier about, you had a probation officer and then you became a probation officer, colleague of your other probation officer when you were there.

**CKG:** [laughs] I met my probation officer, who was retiring.

**CG:** Exactly! And you recently retired as a probation officer.
CKG: Yes, I did. I retired May Day! May Day—May 1, 2015, I retired. That was the year I did the Chata Gutierrez mural. And people who are not familiar with Chata Gutierrez—she was a DJ on KPOO Radio, 89.5 FM, which is a local radio station, privately owned, run on donations and grants. It’s a community radio station.

And Chata was a DJ there for forty years. And she started off as a little secretary at Centro de Cambio, which was a rehabilitation program for heroin addicts in the Mission. It was one of the first live-in residential heroin addict programs in the Mission, Centro de Cambio. She was a secretary there when she was like fifteen, sixteen.

One day they took some of the clients on a field trip to the radio station, and she took [to it] like a fish to water and started learning and interning there, and she wound up having a radio show called En Clave. You can still listen to it to this day. Every Saturday from twelve to three—and she did that show for forty years. And she got cancer. She was well-known and well—cause growing up in the seventies, that’s when we’d listen to KPOO. All the rumberos and conga players would listen to her show religiously, every Saturday, ’cause Eddie Palmieri would come when he was in town, and they’d interview him. Tito Puente—all the greats that came from New York—Willie Colón, Ray Barretto—all went to her show. She didn’t read them up.

And so, we were in awe of her. And she got sick. I think it was 2009 [when] she got diagnosed. And she did her show until two weeks before she died. With all the treatment she was going through and everything, she did the show.

So we decided she was an icon because she brought the community into the radio station and featured events that would affect—like police brutality, employment, education. She brought people who were in those fields and would talk about it, and bring them into the community, as well as play some badass Latin jazz, salsa music, all the time, and everybody. So, friends of hers got together, and I was one of her friends, fortunately, and we decided to pick a wall to paint a mural in her honor. The year I retired was the culmination of about maybe two years ‘worth of fundraising money. But we couldn’t raise enough; we needed at least $10,000 to paint the mural, [but] we only raised about $2,400. We did a couple of shows. My friend Gil Medina, his wife, Holly, and Stephanie and Laureano, we had a little team, but we didn’t raise enough money.

And right at that same time, Precita [Eyes], Susan Cervantes, had gotten a big block grant from the mayor’s office or from the Arts Commission to do five murals. The wall that—I had already gotten permission from the owner, who was the tamale lady! The tamale lady! I beat Susan to the tamale lady and got the tamale lady’s writing, permission in writing, to paint the mural on her wall on 24th and South Van Ness. Next to the House of Brakes, next to the iconic...
Carnaval mural by Daniel Galvez. Her only criteria was to put [the] logo of her tamale business somehow into the mural. And her logo was the Virgen of Guadalupe, and instead of roses around her, it was tamalitos. So I figured out a way to put it in the design, and she said, “I love it. This is good.”

So I had the permission; Susan had the money. And she wanted that wall. So I go, well, we wound up saying, “OK, well, if I give you the money for the wall, I’ll get the scaffolding, the paints, everything you need. We’ll do your design.” And she gave me a crew of kids to work with, Urban Youth Arts. So I had a crew! It was perfect timing.

And Susan’s one of my mentors. And we wound up working it out, and we painted it the year I retired from probation. We had a big dedication ceremony, ‘cause in that mural I put a lot of the rumberos that I used to watch growing up in Dolores Park. Raúl Rico from Santana, Karl Perazzo from Santana. Me and Karl grew up together competing against each other, playing congas in the park. And he eventually wound up playing with Santana. He’s been with Santana for the last twenty-five, thirty years. And we’re still—I’m doing that artwork for Karl right now; I’m doing that one for Karl. ‘Cause he loved this one so much, he wanted me to do a variation of it for him—‘cause he’s doing a talk show.

**CG:** So the one that you did for Carnaval a few years ago, you’re using that same kind of idea and iconography.

**CKG:** With percussionists.

**CG:** With percussionists, and there’s like a lot of congas and there’s like tambores (drums), timbales (kettledrums), timbas (hand drums).

**CKG:** Yeah, so we’re all still good friends. And Raúl Rico, who’s Santana’s conga player, he passed away. His last public appearance was at my dedication ceremony for that mural. John Santos is in that mural. Annette Aguilar, who’s one of the original female rumberas; I went to junior high school with her [at] Horace Mann. Richard Segovia, Mr.—the mayor of the Mission, Mr. Bandito—he’s in it. Oscar Soltero, one of my bosom buddies, we grew up playing together, cutting school, stealing cars. Oh, my God. And we wound up playing congas. Oscar’s a well-known percussionist with Avance—he plays with Karl’s band, Avance. He plays with a lot of—Salsa Caliente. So I put Oscar in the mural.

And so, all these iconic—they were all there the day of the celebration. And we [had] rumberos. We had batá drummers. We had Anthony Blea y su Charanga band there. We had a—Murguiá, man, the poet laureate. Oh, my God, I just went blank—Alejandro Murguiá. He was
there. He recited poetry. We had poetry. We had music. We had batá. We had folklóricos. We had Aztec dancers. That was—what a way to retire. It was like my big retirement party and celebration of Chata’s life. And Chata’s family and friends were all there to dedicate it.

And José Ruiz, the guy that eventually took over Chata’s show—she groomed him to take over her show because she knew she was on her way out. And Chuy Varela, Mr. KCSM, Latin jazz, he hosted the event. So we had a great, great event that day, and it will live on in my memory forever. But that’s the year I retired. Since my retirement six years ago, I’ve painted.

**CG:** I was going to say, you retired from probation officer, but if anything, you just became even more prolific in your art.

**CKG:** Well, just, I’m just doing it ’cause now I could do what I want, when I want.

**CG:** You were describing something just before we started this conversation, and you were saying, “I’m my own boss finally.” And how do you describe this time in your life now, that you are able to do this?

**CKG:** It’s a beautiful thing because my wife is fifteen years younger than I. She still has to work, so we couldn’t retire together. She’s still building up her pension, and we have two little ones. So the best part about it is I get to be home with my—well, Nick is already a teenager. But when I retired, he was about eleven. No he was about nine. Six minus fifteen—so yeah, he was about eight. Sophie was about three years old. Now Sophie’s nine; Nick is fifteen.

But that time to be home with my kids—I take them to school every day, pick them up from school, bring them home, cook, do my art when I want. I don’t have to call in sick, like I was telling you. I don’t take a sick day or a vacation day; I don’t need to.

And if I get a commission or if I get a job—I recently did a couple of restaurant murals in San Francisco, and he gave me the key to the place, and it was under construction. So if I didn’t feel like going a couple days, I’d stay home and watch TV all day and then go back and paint whenever I wanted to.

**CG:** But you still had a deadline, you know, I mean, you’re like, “I need to finish this thing; it’s up to me to finish it.”

**CKG:** As long as I—and I enjoy what I do, and I had it already envisioned in my mind. Once I have it pictured in my mind, I know how it’s going to look.
So I eventually was eager. When I got to 70 percent complete, I was like on a mission; I wouldn’t stop. I’d be on it every day, working on weekends, Saturday, Sunday. And my wife would say, “God, you need to take a break!” I’d go, “No, I’m almost done.” Once I’m done, I get paid! A big, nice chunk of money.

But that’s the good thing. You know, I’m my own boss. I don’t have—if I hire somebody to help me, assist me, I’ll use the artists that I worked with before. I like working with a buddy of mine; his name is Pablo Ruiz. He calls himself Pablito something. He’s a really—a gifted young Boliviano who, dynamite artist, and he worked with me on the Chata mural. And since then we’ve become kind of like a team. I’ve hired him to work with me on different mural projects.

I did one over here in the Bayview Hunters Point for a community agency, and he worked with me on that. And I’m going to hire him to work with me on the new one for Casa Adelante. He’s very prolific. He works a lot with Pancho Pescador, who’s a well-known artist. He does a lot of stuff in the East Bay, a lot of spray can art.

I’m not good at that; I use my brushes. I just never developed the skill for spray can, but the way they do their work is like photographic, man. Airbrush kind of stuff. But I like working with younger cats, passing the torch. And that’s what I’m doing now. And I’ll continue to do it probably till the day I die. And with my music too. Playing in a band and making money playing music—it’s always fun.

**CG:** When you think of this collaboration with Pablo, but also you think of just muralism in your work, and you’re mentioning Susan; you also mentioned Ray Patlán. You also have worked with Mike Ríos, [and] I’m fortunate enough to have talked to the three of them at this point. But it’s just one thing that I really value about your work, and the work that they all have done—it really isn’t Carlos’s work. It’s not like this has to be signed it’s mine, [or] this is Mike Ríos’s. It’s just it happens to be that it’s Mike and Carlos, or it’s Ray and Carlos, or Susan and Carlos.

So it’s a very nice thing. How do you describe that collaboration? Like with them specifically, but also like now with Pablo, or like with the kids, as you were saying. These kids that happened to be in gangs, they are also collaborators, and they were doing the same action. They were like—they were actually doing the same art. They were artists too. How do you describe that collaboration?

**CKG:** Without even knowing it, we put our egos aside. ‘Cause everybody has an ego. There’s a lot of arrogant people who don’t work well with others. But these guys are teachers. They
know about passing the torch. So they’re willing to, like, if they trust you and your ability enough, they’re willing to say, “OK, I like that idea; let’s use that. Let’s combine and collaborate."

And Ray Patlán’s always been open to that. Susan definitely loves getting input from the youth. And that was one of the issues I had with Susan—because I had a design already made for the Chata mural. But since she’s paying for it, I had to kind of compromise and let the kids put their ideas. But she gave me the liberty of picking the best ideas and putting them in the composition where I felt it wasn’t changing my main idea. So there always is compromise—and Susan likes doing stuff that the kids do that’s organic. It doesn’t have to be part of the plan in the main sketch. She can always let it flow naturally with, “OK that really doesn’t look like a horse; it looks more like a bear. It’s all right. Doesn’t matter. Let that kid paint that.” She does that a lot and lets the kids express themselves.

There’s always a time and a place for that, and so it works well a lot, but it doesn’t always work well. It just depends who you’re working with, and if we have a set design, then we’re going to go with that design.

And that’s what I’m going to be doing with these other artists at the Casa Adelante—the main idea. And I’m going to let them, each one, play off of this theme and have their own version of it. So it’s a collaboration, but that’s the theme that they accepted, and what they wanted, because it met the criteria of their description of what they wanted. And so, I’ll let them play off of it.

And I’ve learned, by working with Ray and Mike and Susan, how to teach, because that’s how they teach. And that’s the best way, because it gives the young artists like: “Oh, I can’t do that; he’s my boss.” No, it’s like, “I’m sharing with you.” And then you eventually go on your way, and you pass the torch. You eventually—each one teach one—reach back and bring them in.

And that’s basically the philosophy of my life, throughout life, with college and everything we do in the community. We have to help each other, reach back and pull ‘em in. Because [we can be] damn sure the system isn’t doing it [laughs]. The Man isn’t doing it [laughs]. You know, who’s the Man? Well, you know, it’s a system that’s going to eat you up if you don’t get wise.

**CG:** And the way that you were really tackling that, ’cause you were head-on. You’re reaching into the community and the community was also working with you. Like, it wasn’t just your
effort, it was also the community’s effort. And the community became artists, and you became part of the community.

You also, of course, were since the beginning, like Mission born and raised, man. But at the same time, it was the Mission. And also just, this whole San Francisco Bay Area. But if you think of the Mission, right? This is a question that I really wanted to ask you, which is what does the Mission mean to you?

CKG: Well, it’s home. It’s my cradle, my crib, where I was born and raised. And I wouldn’t change a thing. Even all the negative things that happened as a result of my rebelliousness, it all led to something else because that rebelliousness came from activism and politics and resistance to this bigger system. The war machine, politics, city government keeping us down, access to education, the police in our neighborhood fucking with us all the time—it was a resistance. And growing up, [airplane engine roars] there goes otro avión (another airplane)—there goes the system!

CG: Otro avión.

CKG: Corporations flying above us! [laughs]

But anyways, it was a natural rebelliousness, resistance for positive change. And had I gone into the street life any further and hung out with my criminal friends and got into drugs and the drive-bys and the violence that came with it, I probably wouldn’t be sitting here talking to you.

But that one little diversion from it—I still have my foot in it and respect from the gangsters. But at the same time, the community was more important, and educating our youth and diverting them from a life of drugs, and misery, and crime, and poverty is basically—what I learned is that’s what the Man wants. That’s what the system wants. It wants to gobble you up. And it’s up to you to educate yourself and learn how to navigate to success.

And art and music were my vehicle, and community organizing—and the education opportunity program. Had it not been for that program, I wouldn’t have gone to college. I don’t know where I’d be. But at least I was at the right place at the right time, and I always managed to land on my feet, no matter what.

And I owe that to my mother, my father, my sisters, my immediate family, my neighborhood, agencies I worked with, rap, Horizons, Jamestown, Instituto Familiar de la Raza, oh, my God, Arriba Juntos—all these agencies that were in the Mission at the time. I mean, the Mission was a political hub of activity that fought for the community, and that’s what the Mission is
to me. It’s what made me a fighter; it’s what made me survive. And I’ll always come back to it, even though it’s watered down now.

I got priced out in the first wave of technology. I was renting an apartment for $1,200 with my wife, two-bedroom apartment. A new owner bought the building and raised the rent to $3,400! Luckily, another musician friend, Anthony Blea, who’s a well-known violinist, he used to live here, and he rehearsed with his band here. This place has good juju.

CG: It has great juju! Like, I’m here and not only does it feel like the space has great juju, I think you even added to the juju! I’m like looking at all the art on the ceiling, on the walls, on top of chairs.

CKG: That’s my altar; that’s my altar right there.

CG: Sí, el altar está (Yes, the altar is there).

CKG: That’s all my loved ones, friends who have gone before us, who are in heaven now, and my friends who are living, and my family who’s alive. That’s who I honor, and that’s what I live for.

CG: And that’s like one of the important things that I really value about just the way that you have created your life, because you have—it is a matter of not only do you know where you’ve been [and how] you have struggled and like persevered, you have your peeps. You have your family; it’s still there. Like the institutions, even, that you’re naming. It’s kind of interesting because, a lot of the time, these are also institutions, sometimes, that might have caused some harm, but you learned to work with institutions—and with your family and with other people that at some point maybe someone had crossed you, when you’re a teenager, and you probably even ended up working with them at some point.

So it’s just such a beautiful way of just, not only coexistence, but like, working together. Just being. Accepting each other. So I feel like, Carlos, at the end of the day, how do you see your life, right? You’re currently, for example, and you don’t have to get into it as much, but you have now been in chemo. Like you just found out that you have cancer. So it’s like, how are you seeing all of these things now through the lens?

CKG: I have a new lens. I have a new lens because I was always work hard, party hard. I’ve always, you know—I’ve been an alcoholic pretty much most of my life, since I was twelve years old. And throughout my youth and teens, I partied hard. I did drugs; I did everything in
the book. I sold angel dust, [and] I did angel dust. I tried heroin, but I never liked it. Cocaine came out, and I was selling that in college.

One common thread throughout all that—I eventually left drugs behind once I became a probation officer, ’cause they test you and all that—but one common thread was alcohol. And I don’t drink beer; I don’t drink wine. I drink tequila. And that’s my thing. And I think for many years I was poisoning myself [with] my diet. I stopped exercising. I used to work out a lot ’cause I used to box. And a boxer’s regimen is one of the best workouts ever—skipping rope, running, hitting the bag, calisthenics. You get your wind; you don’t smoke, never smoke. And that’s one thing I never did. And you get in the best shape of your life. Once I met my wife, that shit was over, dude. But I started, not only the alcohol, but my diets—Latino diet, a lot of fried foods, a lot of greasy carnitas, carne asada, cholesterol.

And that all eventually led to my cancer developing, and I was just diagnosed April of this year. And the symptoms—I had them for a long time—was acid reflux. Mylanta, Tums. It took fifteen years for this to develop into the tumor that I have in my esophagus.

And in April I noticed, well, February, March, I noticed that I couldn’t swallow—issues eating. I thought it was indigestion. My wife finally said, “You know what? Something’s wrong.” They put a camera down my throat, found a tumor in April. Immediately they put me into chemo and radiation, and I just finished radiation this past Tuesday. Chemo, I had my last session of chemo on Wednesday of last week.

And I realized how when I was told I had cancer, it was like, man. And my wife really didn’t take it well. And didn’t tell my kids because they would be distracted from school. So we kind of kept it as long as we could. But your life flashes before your eyes, and you realize everything you’ve done that led up to it. And it wasn’t a guilty feeling—it was like [thud] gotta accept it. It is what it is. If I don’t learn from this, like I’ve learned from every other fall I’ve had in my life, I’m going to repeat it.

So now, my new lens is I’m looking at everything towards a second chance, a second chance at life many people don’t get. I’m lucky they caught this early, at early stage two. And the doctors was aggressive, and they shrank it. I’ll find out in the next couple of weeks from the PET scan how much it shrank and what type of surgery they’ll do—less invasive, more invasive. But they’re going to do surgery and cut out the tissue where the tumor was. And I’m going to be on another feeding tube.

I was morbidly obese when I got diagnosed. I was like 60, 70 pounds over my weight. I’m only 5 feet 6 inches, [and] I was weighing 222 pounds. I’m supposed to weigh, like, about 150, 160
[laughs]. But they said in a way it was a good thing; because had I been 150, 160 pounds, at my normal weight, I would wind up looking like a skeleton when all this is said and done.

So, in a way, being chubby [laughs] is kind of like good 'cause I could lose that weight, bring my sugar down. And once they cut out this tumor, I'm going to be on a feeding tube. I'm going to lose another 20, 30 pounds. But rather than look at that as a bad thing, it's a good thing. Because I wanted to lose weight—not this way—but now once I get there, I'm keeping it off. And my son is at the age where he needs to work out, learn how to fight, learn how to protect himself and stuff.

CG: You might get into boxing again with him?

CKG: Well, the workout. We have a UFC gym that I'm a member of over here.

CG: All the calisthenics, all the things you were describing.

CKG: Yeah, and he got bullied a couple of times. So I think, with COVID, him being home, he doesn't want to go back to school, I'm saying, “Nah, bro, you gotta get back in there. You gotta get back in there and mix it up!”

So, the timing is right. I think it's a new opportunity—kind of like I got an overhaul. Like an old Chevy gets a new engine and a paint job—that's what I'm looking at it as. I got overhauled. And I'm lucky if I get another twenty years out of this life; it's going to be quality and healthy. No more poison. All the veneno, a la verga (poison, screw it). No more veneno, bro. It's all healthy, positive, art, music, and loving my family. I'm a lucky guy! So, that's how I'm looking at it now. So, from something bad, what was that saying? No hay que por nada mal—

CG: No hay mal que por bien no venga (Every cloud has a silver lining).

CKG: Yeah, exactly. So that's what I'm looking at it as. And so, I want to continue. I have all these paintings, man, [and] they are in different stages of completion that I kind of like put on hold because I got sick. And so, now that my outlook looks better, I'm going to finish all them. I don't want to die and have unfinished paintings. They'll be worth more money when I'm dead anyway. But at least I leave my family something. [laughs]

CG: Have you—when you think of your kids, when you think of your wife, and even just other members of your family, how do they see your art and your activism? But also you think of just the knowledge that you have, right? Like, the skills that you have, like have they wanted
to maybe—like your kids, take a little bit of like, “Hey, Dad, can you teach me a little bit of this?”

**CKG:** Well, my daughter is definitely a little artist. She has her own little artistic streak in her. And now I gave her my old iPad and it has Procreate. And she’s taken to Procreate—like she’s taking photographs and doing all these manipulations on it. And she’s doing her little drawings. So my daughter definitely—my wife noticed it too—she definitely has an artistic thing about her.

My son Nicholas is more of a cerebral, really smart, good at computers; he's getting 3.5 [grade point average] and up. So I’m really proud of him. Sophie is getting 4.0; she's getting straight As. And she hates school. She goes, “Dad, you have to hate it to know it.” That’s her saying, my daughter. But she is so smart. So, my kids, one of them I’m rubbing off on; my other, my grown-up kids from my first wife, they’re doing well. My son Carlitos, Carlos Junior, he’s a techie, he’s a creative director for a tech company. I can’t mention the name. But he's doing well; he's making six figures. His fiancée, she is from East LA; she’s a Chicana. She’s a graphic artist. She’s making six—they’re both—I don’t have to worry about them. They’re going to have a great life.

My stepson Diego is graduating from San Francisco State in broadcast—broadcast major. So he’s learning behind the camera, in front of the camera, production, all that stuff. And so he’s going to be doing an internship soon. I don’t have to worry about him. He lives with his cousins in San Jose. My other stepson, Ronnie, graduated from Syracuse University. And he’s looking for a job in green technology. And so he just graduated last May. So, all my boys are like—I’m happy. But only one, my daughter, is the one that has the little artistic streak.

The rest of my family loves my art. I give them prints; I give them art. They like to brag about me. They come to my gigs when I play music.

And so I think I just want to continue that, but without all the poison. 'Cause when I drink I get rowdy. I’m not violent, but you know, I like to have a good time. I probably get obnoxious and so that—those days are over now. And it’s going to be more like the new green me. The overhauled Chevy. A restomod.

You know what a restomod is? It’s where you restore an old car, but it has all new modern mechanical. So it still looks old but nice, but inside it’s all modern mechanics. I’m a restomod. That’s what I am; that’s what I consider myself. If I get through. I can’t be too cocky, ’cause there’s no guarantees. They only told me I have an 80 percent chance of beating this. There’s still 20 percent that it could come back. But I’ll take 80 over 40 or 50 anytime. [laughs]
CG: That’s still a good percentage, and if anything, your attitude towards it, I think it’s going to help. Like, regardless of if you have to continue battling it—or we use this metaphor, battling. And not—like you just have to keep going and like trying to just [excise] a tumor, right? It’s a biological thing; it’s not a battle. You are a fighter; you’ve fought. This is not a fight. You’ve won already, like [with] this attitude.

So I think it’s just a very nice thing to just hear you say all of these things and the outlook that you have towards life. If you think of your life and everything, there’s this question that I like asking that is—it’s very open—but it’s very important because we don’t get asked that question as much. What do you need to tell me or what do I need to know so I can better understand you?

CKG: I don’t know; that’s a tough question. I am, like Popeye says, I am what I am, and that’s all that I am. I’m an artist. I’m a musician. I’m a father. I’m a husband. I’m a brother. I’m an uncle. I mean, I’m a friend—all my friends, I love my friends. I don’t think I have any enemies.

All I want to do is create and love. That’s it. Just give love. One of my old mentors told me, “Just give them love” when we were talking about the kids who were disadvantaged and in and out of juvenile. Many of those kids came from broken homes and had no love, had no structure. And basically the bottom line is: give them love. And that’s what I do—give love.

CG: That’s just like the basis. And it just happens to not be the basis sometimes. So it’s just very nice that that’s how you look at it. I would say that I have one last question, which would be, and you can be as long-winded as you want. There’s literally no limit here, because I just really want to ask you this.

And it’s when you think of not only your life recently, but just in general, what do you want to say that you haven’t been able to say before? Or what is something that you just haven’t been able to talk about as freely that you would like to be talking about it freely right now?

CKG: I don’t know. I’ve been pretty open about everything. There’s nothing that is pending on my mind that needs to get out ’cause I’m pretty much an open book. I can’t think of anything. I could—that’s something I haven’t said that I want to say, that I can’t say. ’Cause I just let you have it when you’re in front of me. I don’t hold back on anything. I’m an open book; I have nothing to hide.

Everything I’ve done, I have no regrets—the good and the bad. I’ve had a reputation as a hard-partying person. And I’ve lost relationships as a result of it—my first marriage. And in the time
I was single between my first marriage and my current wife now, my hard-partying lifestyle as a musician and artist. I have my profession, and that was stressful enough. And so I had to let it out.

And I lost relationships with beautiful ladies that I could have married, but it just wasn’t my time. Then when I met my wife, I finally was ready to settle down, and here I am now. But I’ve never kept anything a secret or—you know, my alcoholism, it’s something that I’ve acknowledged and faced. And I’m going to beat it now that I have this new fight.

But there’s nothing I can think of that I could say that I want to say. Only laugh a lot! Laugh. I love comedy, I love [laughs] laughing. I have [airplane engine roars]—

CG: We should laugh about the el avión (the plane).

CKG: Yeah [laughs]. Another plane, goddamn it. And my sense of humor is—I love stand-up comics. I love—I think laughter is something that people need more of. Some people are too—damn, oh, it’s garbage day today. [laughs] So, not only do we have planes, we have—I have the train station a block behind me, the Caltrain station. We have BART right down the block. The freeway. And today happens to be garbage day, so the garbicheros are [laughs]. You hear the hydraulics crushing everything.

This neighborhood on Fridays—you can’t sleep in. You can never sleep in here. We have double-paned windows in all the houses in the neighborhood; the SF Airport had to pay for that. ’Cause you have to have double-paned. And it doesn’t do anything for the noise. It’s still—

CG: You’re still going to see the airplanes, you’re still going to hear everything, but it’s kind of the music of the neighborhood—this is like what the neighborhood sounds like.

CKG: Yeah, lucky. You know, when I was growing up in the Mission, I grew up in a part of the neighborhood [that] had about one, two, three, four, five—five bars! Five cantinas in a two-block radius of my—so every night at two in the morning. [And] I lived by the fire station and the hospital where you can hear ambulances on a regular basis, fire engines on a regular basis. And then they had a main Muni bus line going by my house. You could hear the electrical buses going [imitates static].

CG: The static.
CG: But at two in the morning, a little after two in the morning, when the bars closed, you could hear all the *borrachos* in the neighborhood, “Hey, *cabrón* (bastard)” People fighting, guys chasing their girlfriends arguing.

I mean, I grew up in that, and it is so funny because that stuff is depicted as stereotypical in many—in movies and stuff—but it really is true. [laughs] I grew up [with it]; it’s hilarious, dude. And one of the things I always carry with me is a sense of humor. We make fun of everything. We grew up laughing at people. “Look at your shoes, man! What’s wrong with your shoes, buddy?” [laughs] “That shit don’t match, homie!” Everybody would try to top each other off on cap. We called it capping. Capping on each other, one on top of the other.

CG: Which is also something that, if you think of it, you did with murals. ‘Cause someone would start and then you’re riffing off this design or this idea. And like, if anything, you would be like the ringleader of the capping too, in the mural.

CKG: Well, that’s more in the writers and graffiti artists. But more traditional muralists, there wasn’t much of that. I’m talking more about growing up on the streets with the knuckleheads, at school.

CG: Yeah, absolutely. And as you’re saying, graffiti artists, of course, like you’re kind of painting on top of it. But what I’m saying is more, even the ideas of these students that you were saying when you were mentioning Susan. It’s just like they are still capping on like, “OK, I want to add this.” And then you’re still the one that like: “OK, we’re adding it, but we’re adding it here.” It still needs to be within the design.

CKG: Yeah, we have to. That’s just the way I am. ‘Cause when the people at Casa Adelante were talking to me, they go, “Well, you have to, you [have to] be willing to work with these artists.” I go, “Yeah.”

And then there’s another thing that I kind of, like, I don’t know if I turned them off to it, but we have to get community input. And the immediate community around Casa Adelante—it’s all these newcomers and gentrifiers and techies that moved into the Mission [and] watered it down.

So the purpose of this project was to create art that identifies the struggles for equal housing and fair housing, affordable housing—the struggles of the Mission. So why would I want input from the very people that have watered it down? And I told them that, I go, “That’s going to be kind of like, you’re asking the gentrifiers to [give] input [on] our work. They’re going to shoot it down! ‘Cause they’re going to feel threatened by what we’re saying!
We don’t want them here!” [laughs] We want affordable housing, and they’re the ones that shot it up.

And they moved—10,000 families were moved out of the Mission, displaced, because of this gentrification and tech boom in the Mission. Decimated all the people who rented. The people who were fortunate enough to buy are still there. That’s what the—hanging on by a thread in the Mission, the culture that’s there, is the people who were able to buy [and] they bought and stayed.

But those who were renters like me? Adiós. And then you’re asking us to have them give input? And so, I was like, “You know what, if I’m at that meeting, you’re not going to like what I have to say to these people. And I’m not going to take shit from any of these motherfuckers who come invade the neighborhood. And now they’re trying to call shots on telling us how to fucking paint our mural?”

So, I got emotional, but I said, “But you know what? I’ll work on toning my volume down, and I’ll be patient. But I mean, you guys are asking for too many cooks in the pot. That’s the design, and I’m sticking with my design. And I’m willing to work with the two other artists to spin off of it and do their ideas of it. But now you’re asking [for] community input, and the people that live around here are the same people that we’re fighting not to be here.” [laughs] So yeah, there’s a lot of anger—you’re right. Things that I haven’t said. But I think a lot of my anger is—

**CG:** Justified, it’s absolutely. You got kicked out also. Like, it’s fine.

**CKG:** Something beyond my control—I have no control over it. I’m not a billionaire. I’m not a rich person. I’m not someone with influence at the city level. I have no control over the levers. So, my anger is justified and deeply rooted, and I can look at those invaders as invaders. But then again, those are people who are trying to come and make a living too, right? Except they’re naive and blind and oblivious to what they’ve done. ‘Cause they have no clue of how decimated this beautiful, traditional, cultural enclave of *raza* [is].

And the Mission wasn’t just Mexican American; it was everybody. *La raza cósmica* was all in the Mission—including Filipino, Asian, Polynesian, Black, poor whites, hardworking middle-class people, poor people. I remember I was a translator for my mom ’cause she never learned a word of English in the Mission—because she didn’t need to.

We had KOFY, [the] Spanish station. We had Mercado Mi Rancho one block away, with the *panadería, carnicería* (bakery, butcher shop), everything we needed, products. She was, “¿Pa’
qué necesito el inglés? ¡Aquí tengo todo!(What do I need English for? I got everything here!)
OK, but whenever we went to go get food stamps, I was a translator. And that was my first contact with the system, the government. Well, my mom needs this and this and that, “¿Qué dice el señor? (What is the man saying?)” “Oh, dice que quiere saber esto y lo otro (He says he wants to know this and that).” And I’d be the translator. And that’s my first taste of the system. And I became bilingual. That’s what helped me get the job as a probation officer.

But a lot of that anger at the systems in power is there. And that’s something I can’t express myself about, the anger I feel about it. Because I’ve experienced it, and I’ve learned to maneuver and succeed in spite of it. And I hope other people can do that too. ‘Cause there’s other people who fight it [and] wind up in jail, [or] fight it in another way [and] wind up addicted to drugs and on the streets.

And so, learning how to maneuver in a system with a lot of booby traps is basically what maybe is something I need to learn to tell people. To keep sharing my experiences so other people can kind of follow that path. ‘Cause there’s mines everywhere, and if you know where the mines are, you step around them, [laughs] basically. And that’s what I’ve done all my life.

**CG:** I think that that is something really valuable that you just left people with, because the important opportunity with what we just talked about is that we want to not only share with people that would be like, “Oh, I’m going to be in Chicano studies.” “I’m going to be in ethnic studies.” “I’m going to be into art history.” No. This is about being able to share your experiences with real life, real-life experiences that you still maneuver through.

And, if anything, I do think that you said—I don’t think you gave yourself that much credit, but that’s my personal opinion. That you haven’t expressed your anger; you just did. And you expressed it in a way that is so meaningful and helpful for anyone that will listen to this. Because it’s not only about what you did; it’s what you’re doing with what you just communicated. You’re still teaching someone how to think. So, I think with that, Carlos, do you have anything else that you want to say?

**CKG:** No, no, no, man. I think I said it all. But one thing I missed saying is, even when you’re in college, if you’re lucky enough to get accepted to a college, the actual classes you take aren’t the education. It’s the bureaucracy in the college. Because you have to have so many credits. You have to have so many general ed [classes]. You have to have so many of your major. And if they make a mistake on your check for like—I’m an EOP student, I was getting my grant, I was getting grant money. And if you didn’t, if you didn’t get a final grade on a class, they’ll hold back your check, and then you have to learn how to navigate that system.
And I learned my education came from dealing with the bureaucracy in the administration of college on how to get—’cause I can’t survive without that check. So, I had connections inside colleges. “Who’s the EOP counselor?” “Who’s this financial aid counselor?” “Well, you gotta talk to this person.” And I’d fucking catch them outside. And I’d go, “OK, man. You do this or that. Hey, my check’s being held back, man. Can you help me out?” Yada yada. And you learn who to talk to, because at the front there, they go, “Sorry, we can’t help you.” Na, na, na, na, na, na, na. *Te la están jalando así* (They’re messing with you like that).

And so, it’s like, no, man, you gotta take action. And for me the education came from manipulating and learning the system. Even teachers that were gonna flunk me, I was able to sweet-talk them into giving me a passing grade [*laughs*]. “Oh, let me do some extra credit; let me do this! I’ll paint a mural.”

I did a mural for the La Raza studies chair. And at that time it was Dr. Loco—José, José Cuéllar. You know him, right? You’ve heard of Dr. Loco, José Cuéllar? He was the chair of La Raza studies at San Francisco State. So, Carlos Córdova and José agreed to give me extra credit ’cause I was flunking a class, and I painted a mural for the office.

Well, because I was in La Raza, the students saw me painting it, and they go, “Hey, man, is that for the La Raza office?” I go, “No, it’s for the faculty, the chair’s office.” [*laughs*] They made a big fight, and they made a big stink, and they was, like, tug of war with the painting. And finally, Dr. Loco and Carlos Córdova and [inaudible] said, “Just give it to La Raza students.” It’s in the La Raza student office to this day. [*laughs*]

But you learn how to work that system, and it applies in life in general. You have to be able to find who the key people are—no, the person, not the teller. You gotta go to the fucking manager. Or somebody who’s handling what you need. And that’s how you do it.

**CG:** It’s a lot of navigating, like what you said. And it’s the maneuvering and, if anything, I think that’s an essential thing that a lot of people like you and I don’t learn unless they have experiences. And that’s something that, if anything, if they hear this, it’s like, actually, just go maneuver. It just gets better with practice, I guess.

**CKG:** They should have came to me from the beginning. You got someone at the front saying no. And a lot of people give up right there. And then they wind up flunking out, dropping out, because of a technicality that they could have fixed—

**CG:** If you talk to the right person. But you gotta go do it.
CKG: Work it, baby. Massage it.

CG: [laughs].

CKG: That’s how it is, man. If you have to, OK, man, here you go.

CG: There’s always like a way. It’s just, what I’m hearing from you it’s just so important which is just, hey, figure it out. There’s always a way of like, they’re telling you a no currently. They’re telling you, this person is telling you a no—that doesn’t mean that in the long-term end goal, endgame is still that yes that will help you get your degree and go to the next thing and do the next thing.

CKG: Entro por la salida (I go in through the exit). [laughs] Sorry. Come in the side door.

CG: That is awesome. I think that’s a perfect end there. And Carlos, thank you so much for your time.

CKG: Thank you, brother. Nice meeting you, Camilo.

CG: Igual (same). Muchas gracias (thank you very much).

Full of laughter, jokes, and stories, Carlos “Kookie” Gonzalez showed me some of his drums and I asked him if I could record some of his famous conga playing. [congas playing]

CKG: Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you. [congas playing] [bells tinkling] [laughs]

After he played, I left his garage to put my gear in the car. I saw Carlos sitting on his porch making a call, smiling and reminding me of the beauty in seeing the full circles in his life, of being a student and a teacher, of being in juvenile hall and then becoming a probation officer himself [and] working with the same person who used to be his own probation officer back in the day—full circles that invite us into his life story and his legacy.

This oral history of Carlos “Kookie” Gonzalez was a collaborative effort, like murals also are. The team behind it was:

ERICA GANGSEI: Erica Gangsei

MYISA PLANCQ-GRAHAM: Myisa Plancq-Graham

CG: Who served as executive producers.

SFMOMA Proyecto Mission Murals Oral History Audio Transcripts
NATALIA DE LA ROSA: Natalia de la Rosa

CG: Who served as a production assistant.

The rest of the team included:

JAVIER BRIONES: Javier Briones

KEVIN CARR: Kevin Carr

CHAD COERVER: Chad Coerver

CARY CORDOVA: Cary Cordova

STEPHANIE GARCÉS: Stephanie Garcés

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Melissa San Miguel

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

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

Thanks for listening.