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South Colton Oral History Project

Interview Summary

Interviewee:

Nellie Cortez

Interviewer:

Tom Rivera

Interview Date:

August 11, 2017

Interview Location:

Grand Terrace, CA

Length:

01:08:58

Interview Summary completed by:

M. Camacho Nuno, 2024

Description:

Tom Rivera interviews Nellie Cortez, a woman who was born and raised in South Colton. Though she has lived in nearly all the neighborhoods on the south side, she considers herself to be a Palomera at heart. Cortez explains the fun she used to have as a child playing outside and mentions how venturing out may lead to being a victim of prejudice verbally. Then, the interviewee goes on to explain the comforting role that the Catholic faith had in her life and the safe space that was the church. The topic shifts to Cortez telling Rivera how she met her husband and eventually studied to become a teacher. After going back to the topic of college and games, Cortez talks about the people she remembers and considers to be the leaders of South Colton. The interviewee talks about how, as a teenager, she started to realize segregation was in South Colton and avoided situations due to her skin tone. The interview ends with Cortez explaining living in South Colton and being a Coltonite is the best thing about the city.

Subject Topic:

- Childhood Games
- Music/Singing/Theater
- Prejudice/Racism
- Life-long Friendship
- The Catholic Faith
- Love of Education and Teaching
- Imposter Syndrome
- Strict Parents
- Segregation
- Making History

Spatial Coverage:

Name of Site (if relevant)	General Location/Address
Las Palomas	Neighborhood in Colton, CA
Wilson Elementary School	750 S 8th St, Colton, CA 92324
San Bernardino Valley College	701 S Mt Vernon Ave, San Bernardino, CA 92410
California State University San Bernardino	5500 University Pkwy, San Bernardino, CA 92407

Temporal Coverage:

1938 - 2017

Key Events:

- Cortez was born on 5th Street and has lived in every neighborhood but is a Palomera.
- A lot of children playing around in the neighborhood.
- Having friends that span decades together.
- Becoming involved with the Catholic Church.
- Going to Cal State and getting a teaching degree.
- Participating in the Fiestas Patrias.
- Cortez's husband's role in breaking Colton and Mexican-American history.
- Loving her city so much that Cortez would always return to the area.

Key Organizations:

- "SABER" program

Interview Index:

Media Format	Time (hh:mm:ss)	Topic Discussed
Digital Video	00:16:59 - 00:19:00	Being so close to friends, some connections have lasted since kindergarten.
Digital Video	00:19:00 - 00:23:52	Cortez explains her connection to her faith and her interactions with Father Valencia.
Digital Video	00:33:23 - 00:35:12	Cortez tells Rivera how he was able to help her feel welcome in college.
Digital Video	00:53:12 - 00:55:01	Cortez tells about the community leaders she remembers from South Colton.

Digital Video	01:07:10 - 01:08:40	Best experience of being a Coltonite and living in the community.
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Related Materials

Additional oral history interviews are available from the South Colton Oral History Project at CSUSB, <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/colton-history/>

Full interview transcript can be found below.

Interview Transcript

Start of Interview:

[00:00:00]

TOM RIVERA: Good afternoon. My name is Tom Rivera and welcome to our Oral History Project of South Colton. Today is August 11 and we are videotaping at 23170 Vista Grande Way in Grand Terrace, welcome to our presentation this afternoon. Behind the camera is Mr. Henry Vásquez who is helping us tape this interview this afternoon. Our guest this afternoon is Miss Nellie Cortez. Nellie, welcome, and thank you very much for being with us this afternoon. Nellie, before we start, I know you had a maiden name, so would you introduce yourself properly for us, and then we can go from there?

NELLIE CORTEZ: All right. Thank you, Tom. I'm Nellie Fernandez Cortez.

TOM RIVERA: Nellie, you're a lifelong resident of Colton?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yes, I am. [00:01:00]

TOM RIVERA: You were -- tell me -- let's talk about -- the first question that I have, it says, tell us about life in South Colton when you were young. Your barrio Nellie, what barrio were you -- did you grow up in?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I think I'm an exception to the rule that you have your own barrio because I was born on 5th Street, Colton, and I'm not sure of the name of that particular spot, but it was on 5th Street on the other side of the tracks. Since we were renters, I have lived almost on all the streets in Colton, (laughs) so I'm from every barrio. But I'm a Palomera. I lived most of my time on the south -- what is it, the east side on O Street, O and Pine, [00:02:00] so I considered myself more of a La Paloma.

TOM RIVERA: So you started off on La Calle Cinco, La Calle [Negle?]. And then from there you moved all over the 1.3 square miles that we have of Colton.

NELLIE CORTEZ: You name it, I lived on that street.

TOM RIVERA: And then you finally ended up in La Paloma. Tell us about growing up in La Paloma. Were you part -- did you live in the housing projects?

NELLIE CORTEZ: At one point we did. We lived on those housing projects that were on stilts. I don't know if you remember those.

TOM RIVERA: Oh wonderful. You know Nellie, I've been trying to get a hold of somebody that lived in that tract because I've always been curious because I went to school with many of the people that were raised in that tract. Tell us about that.

NELLIE CORTEZ: It was interesting. To me it was fun because all the kids were closer, [00:03:00] we all had the access to the park because we were right at the park and in the park. So the children got together, we had hiding places under the homes themselves. The only thing that sometimes for neighbors it was way too close, but it was an interesting experience living there. I met so many -- the kids that -- we all went of course to Wilson Elementary. But they didn't last very long and I don't -- I'm not sure why they decided to take those out. I guess -- oh, I think I know why. They started building the homes across the street.

TOM RIVERA: The new project across the street, right?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yes. And that's when we ventured out and decided that we would be renting in a [00:04:00] home.

TOM RIVERA: You mentioned that there were a lot of playmates in the project and you guys had a lot of fun.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right.

TOM RIVERA: What were some of the kids' games that you -- you mentioned hide and seek and going under the project stilts. I would imagine that you also ventured onto the park.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yes, we loved watching the Mercury's play baseball there. In

the evenings we would play tag, hide and go seek, we made our own -- we had those sticks, poles, and then we had beer cans, soda cans, and we would raise them up, and we'd walk across the street on the park, we just invented a lot of different -- kick the can, a lot of games that came to our mind. We used to play [00:05:00] softball, hard ball, right on your street, on O Street. It was fun. And there was never really a need for fear because there was always people sitting, the older people sitting on their porch, taking an eye, you know, watching to see where the kids were.

TOM RIVERA: That's a wonderful safe environment.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Exactly.

TOM RIVERA: You mentioned that the baseball diamond was there and the Mercury's played. On the other side, on the north side of the projects, you had the park, and the rebote.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Exactly. We used to use that as a -- when it wasn't being used for rebote, we would skate, we would roller skate there. I always thought I was Sonja Henie (laughs) for going on my skates, trying to do the moves that she did at the theater. But yeah, we would use it for that. [00:06:00]

TOM RIVERA: Who was your role model there that you tried to --

NELLIE CORTEZ: It was Sonja Henie, I think.

TOM RIVERA: Sonja Henie, yes. Yes, yes.

NELLIE CORTEZ: She was an ice skater at the time.

TOM RIVERA: You were trying to be Sonja Henie.

NELLIE CORTEZ: We were trying to be that, yes. Then we would roller skate on the weekends. We would roller skate all the way into town. I don't know if you remember that little shop, it was comic books, and I guess you bought tickets to get on the bus, but I always used to stop to buy the *Hit Parade* songs, yes, I loved that.

TOM RIVERA: You know, from the projects where you lived, what path did you follow to get to Rosegate downtown?

NELLIE CORTEZ: To go that way?

TOM RIVERA: Yes.

NELLIE CORTEZ: All the way 8th Street and then we'd -- of course crossing the tracks either on 9th Street heading that way, heading down North, and then of course we'd have to take our skates off because of the rails, [00:07:00] but yeah, we never really had a lot of problem with that. We could go up to Valley, at that time it was 8th Street, and so we were fine if we stayed at the taxi place, that was great. I spent a lot of time there looking at the magazines, buying my song books, the *Hit Parade*. I can remember that. Yeah, and then --

TOM RIVERA: Did you do any musical -- did you play an instrument or did you sing?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I sang a lot.

TOM RIVERA: You did?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I always sang. But I don't know who I was sharing this with, but in fifth grade I had Mr. Harris, not our principal, and he let us just do a lot of that kind of theatrical stuff. He let me do a performance and I had my -- I promised candy to the kids if they would be [00:08:00] in my program. (laughs) So we had singing --

TOM RIVERA: You bribed some of those kids to be in your program.

(laughter)

NELLIE CORTEZ: Especially the boys because they never wanted to sing and dance in front of an audience.

TOM RIVERA: Of course not, that was girls stuff.

NELLIE CORTEZ: But they did it and we had -- we had *Singing in the Rain*, we did

a lot of little things. Mr. Harris allowed that and that really got me involved in the singing especially and having to perform in front of other people.

TOM RIVERA: Nellie, let me go back to the projects. What year was that when you were growing up in the projects?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Let's see. It had to be like -- I must have been in third grade. Yeah. So it was what, 1938 --

TOM RIVERA: About 1945 or so?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yeah. I was about eight years old, yes. Like I said it was a short-lived thing. I think we were there maybe two years.

TOM RIVERA: Then you mentioned that across the street they built [00:09:00] the new housing project.

NELLIE CORTEZ: And they're still there.

TOM RIVERA: And they're still there. That was in 1952. Then they tore down the old housing projects. Yeah.

NELLIE CORTEZ: They did. They did away with that. And now we have what is the baseball field and I think basketball --

TOM RIVERA: Oh wonderful sports complex. You're absolutely right. Basketball --

NELLIE CORTEZ: I think they have that now.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah. And then you have swim -- kind of a pool for the kids or a water area for the kids. Two ball fields. So it worked out very well. When you were skating downtown, you took -- you went from the projects to 8th Street, La Cadena, and then from La Cadena you went north, across the railroad tracks, and then got to I Street, which was Valley Boulevard, and you spent some time there at the music center or the magazine center.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right.

TOM RIVERA: You just had -- you know, went through the magazines.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right, we didn't venture too far out, too far [00:10:00] into town because we'd had incidents where if we wanted to go into a store they'd say, "You don't belong here." That kind of stuff.

TOM RIVERA: You experienced some of that prejudice from the store owners.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yeah. I think the only time that we did venture even further in was Halloween because we all had our masks, so we crossed the tracks and went out that way. Other than that we wouldn't. It wasn't until I was like about ten, eleven, that I would go to the Hub City, the movie theater, because we had two.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah, the Hub City was there on La Cadena, Eighth Street --

NELLIE CORTEZ: Exactly.

TOM RIVERA: -- and it was just half a block from Valley Boulevard on the west side of the tracks, yeah. Yeah.

NELLIE CORTEZ: That was wonderful. I became a movie buff since then. Then later on [00:11:00] years, maybe about two or three years later, when they built the new Colton Theater, we weren't allowed to go in there, but every now and then we'd try it and they would let us in. I'd go to both. I'd go watch a double feature at the Hub City and I'd check outside to see if it was still dark, or light, and then oh, I have a chance to go see another movie, so I'd rush over to the other -- to New Colton and see another feature.

TOM RIVERA: How old were you when you did this?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I was about ten, eleven, something like that. And I did that all my life.

TOM RIVERA: Third, fourth, fifth grade.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yeah. Exactly. There was really no fear of being on my own. I wouldn't let other kids do that now, but at that time it was pretty safe.

TOM RIVERA: Okay, it was safe. So you felt pretty safe [00:12:00] and comfortable doing that by yourself. What was your reaction when they said, you can't come in, we can't serve you? What was your --

NELLIE CORTEZ: You know, it's -- as a child I think you can take it a little bit better than an adult. But we just okay, fine, and then turn around, go the other way. But it's hurting, yeah. You remember that, you remember that, yeah.

TOM RIVERA: You mentioned that you -- who were some of your friends that you palled around with during this period, when you lived in the projects and also when you went downtown Colton? Can you remember some of those people?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Of course, yeah. I had [Concha Mercado?], she was one of my best friends at that time.

TOM RIVERA: You know Concha. Just lived on what street, Fernando Street?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Fernando Street.

TOM RIVERA: Fernando Street just around the corner from the projects.

[00:13:00] Then she went on and got her master's at Cal State San Bernardino and she wrote a wonderful master's thesis on the leaders of South Colton. Yeah, she did a great job on that one. So she was one of your friends.

NELLIE CORTEZ: She was one of my best friends, Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: Who were some of the others?

NELLIE CORTEZ: We still meet. The gals that were with me in Kinder, all the way to high school, we still meet.

TOM RIVERA: Do you remember some of those?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Oh yeah. Andrea Luna was one of my good friends and she just passed away about a year or so ago. And it was Bernice Garcia, now she's Lopez. And [Katie Raro?], [Armita Garzaro?], Jean Gonzalez, Evelyn [Velarde?], when she can come. She lives up in the San Diego area. [00:14:00] Let's see,

we've had [Tomi Pass?] and she passed away a couple years back. [Terry Paramo?]. She wasn't from Colton, but she hung around a lot with us so she's still part of our group. Let's see. [Esperanza Marquez?] and she was [lived right there on?] O Street, Pine and O. Let me see. I'm in charge of this group and I can't remember all of them.

TOM RIVERA: Do you have a special name for the group?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I call us the Club 56.

TOM RIVERA: The Club 56. Why the Club 56?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Because that's when we graduated from high school.

TOM RIVERA: Colton High School. All of you were in that Colton High School class. Club 56. I thought you'd call them [Las Luises?] or something like that.

(laughter)

NELLIE CORTEZ: No, Club 56.

TOM RIVERA: (laughs) La luises is a [00:15:00] term for -- a different term for girlfriends.

NELLIE CORTEZ: For girlfriends.

TOM RIVERA: What about the guys, Nellie? Any of the boys that also were in your class, kindergarten class?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yeah, we still -- (inaudible) [Dick Colunga?] of course. We still meet. Then we still have our class reunions and he's a major part of it because he's such an artist, so he always --

TOM RIVERA: (inaudible) [Dick Colunga?]?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yeah, yeah, went to school with him. And we just lost Carlos [Abeutes?] a couple years ago. He couldn't walk even, he used his wheelchair, so for the last -- we didn't know it was going to be our last time with him, we had taken him out to [Cuca's?], he always wanted to go to Cuca's, and so that was our last

time that we met with him. It was a wonderful, wonderful luncheon for us. Yeah.

[00:16:00] But I can't think of -- most of the fellows that we stayed with have passed on. But we do have a lot of compadres, they weren't my age, but they were Eddie's age, Pete Chavez, Bobby [Carrasco?], [Louie Guillen?], those fellows. Cisco Valencia lived in the homes, the projects.

TOM RIVERA: In the projects also.

NELLIE CORTEZ: I would still see him.

TOM RIVERA: So many of the people that lived or grew up in the projects still have that affiliation for one another.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: And they still once in a while you get together and it's like homecoming week.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Exactly. We had Linda [Talavera?] that lived in the corner, yeah, she's --

TOM RIVERA: Yes, she married Pete Chavez.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yeah. And [Ophelia?] and of course she moved to New Mexico. Yeah, we're [00:17:00] still (inaudible) -- it's one of those things that when you've been friends for so long you might not see each for three, four years, and that's what happened to me when I started going back to school, I lost touch with all my friends because when you're going to school you've got to be studying. Once I had done that and then I started participating in some of the older activities, we just picked up where we left off. That's friendship. Yeah. This is what I tell the kids at school. I say, look around you at your friends right now because at this stage, first and second grade, they're always fighting, she doesn't like me, she won't be my friend. I said, no, your friends start like now, treat them nice. The golden rule, treat others as you would like them to treat you. So I based that I said, you know that I

have friends [00:18:00] still that were in my kindergarten class and still we're best friends. That's what friendship is all about. I said, you might not see each other for a while, then when you do see after that time, there's that love still within you. I said, so stop fighting. (laughter)

TOM RIVERA: You know, Nellie, that's one of the things that I mention to people, people outside of Colton I mention to them that I'm going to get together for breakfast with my kindergarten friends. And they say, you what? You what? (laughter) And I think you do the same thing.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right.

TOM RIVERA: You do the same thing. I think many of us that grew up during that era feel the same way about getting together with our kindergarten friends.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yeah, you don't abandon them just because you live somewhere else. Friends forever. [00:19:00]

TOM RIVERA: I think so. You were also very involved in church activities, Nellie.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right.

TOM RIVERA: Tell us about all the activities. When did you start getting involved through the church?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Through the church. Since I was born, I guess. (laughs) Being baptized. We lived so -- we moved so many times. We lived on K on the east side, and so we lived close to Father Valencia, and that became the relationship there. He called me and I lived like two houses away so he'd say, "Ven sobre la campana." So there I'd go. But I was always at church. Like I said, that was my home away from home. I felt safe. I felt loved. When you have your problems, I prayed, and somehow or another they disappeared. Father Valencia was a very, very integral part of my life. I remember I had [00:20:00] my -- I did my first

communion and I was a very tiny girl, and I was seven, and so we made our first communion, and a month later I had ten classes and I said, okay, I'm ready for confirmation. He says, "What?" Muy chiquita. Véte, véte. (laughs) Every year I would go -- I hadn't grown very much but I said, "But I'm older." You know we had the [trinas], I'd go anyway. I wasn't going to be allowed to have my confirmation, but I learned a lot. That to me was my life. If things were bad at home or whatever, that was my, what is it, my home away from home.

TOM RIVERA: And where were the lessons held?

NELLIE CORTEZ: At the -- I don't know if you remember the --

TOM RIVERA: Guadalupana?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Guadalupana, [00:21:00] yes. That was sad to see it go. But eventually they tore that down, yeah.

TOM RIVERA: They were just directly across the alley from the church.

NELLIE CORTEZ: But they also had some kind of a building, if I remember correctly, where they had the classes, and that's where I would go and try and sneak in. Father would say, no, no, no. Yeah, but church and school. I loved school, still do. I tried to instill that to the students that I've had that if you want to well, you've got to get an education.

TOM RIVERA: What are some of the things that you remember about church? [Judas?]?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Oh yeah, of course, everybody talks about that one. Yeah, we would have all our food ready because [00:22:00] we'd always go on a picnic and had Mass with all our Sunday best.

TOM RIVERA: This is Easter Sunday.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Easter Sunday. And as soon as they did the judas and we'd be ready to go. Yeah, we would not leave until we had seen that performance.

TOM RIVERA: What was Judas all about?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Judas is I guess it's el diablo. It was a way to say death to the devil, to evil, and everybody got a kick out of that one.

TOM RIVERA: So every Easter Father Valencia --

NELLIE CORTEZ: Every Easter. Yeah, it was well-known. And you know, he put on some wonderful religious events. He had -- I remember one time it was also that where they were -- no, where they had Jesus and they [00:23:00] walked all the way from L Street up to Sombrero area, and the soldiers, the Roma soldiers, were striking Jesus as he carried the cross, and it was so realistic. One of the ladies that was behind got so involved in that and thought it was for real, and she rushed out of -- right to the crowd, and took the whip away from the guy, "Don't hurt him! Don't do that!" It was so realistic. Yeah, so I tell you he had a lot of --

TOM RIVERA: How old were you then when you saw that?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I guess I was in my twenties at that time, yeah. But we got very involved as a family. Eddie was very --

TOM RIVERA: Now this was your husband Eddie.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Uh-huh, right, at that time.

TOM RIVERA: How did you meet Eddie? [00:24:00]

NELLIE CORTEZ: How did I meet him? Through Linda Chavez, Linda, Pete's wife. Linda [Talavera?], yeah. We went on a blind date.

TOM RIVERA: Oh because Pete and Eddie were good friends.

NELLIE CORTEZ: They're cousins.

TOM RIVERA: They're cousins.

NELLIE CORTEZ: They're cousins, yeah. Everybody's related in Colton for sure. But yeah, through her. When we were --

TOM RIVERA: You said you went on a blind date.

NELLIE CORTEZ: We went on a blind date to the New Colton and that time they said, okay, you guys could come in. We had a certain section for the Mexicans. I never knew that. I just went in, but I never knew that we were supposed to be on the right side, never knew that.

TOM RIVERA: What grade were you in when you met Eddie?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I was in high school. I was a senior.

TOM RIVERA: A senior in high school?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right.

TOM RIVERA: And Eddie had graduated a year --

NELLIE CORTEZ: He had already graduated. Uh-huh. [00:25:00]

TOM RIVERA: So, went out on a blind date.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Five years, we went together for five years, yeah. And out of that we ended up getting married, yeah.

TOM RIVERA: How long have you been married now?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I believe it's 59 years.

TOM RIVERA: Fifty-nine years?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Fifty-nine years.

TOM RIVERA: Congratulations. That's more than a lifetime.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Oh my goodness.

TOM RIVERA: (laughs) That's three generations.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Oh my goodness. We've lasted this long, yes, yes. We -- how weird. We lived in a time where once you married, the wife stayed home, wives were supposed to stay home and cook, have their babies, take care of the husband, take care of the house.

TOM RIVERA: And this was 19-- you graduated in 1956.

NELLIE CORTEZ: This is 1958, yeah, 1958 we got married. [00:26:00] Doing

anything else was not -- it was frowned upon. I remember that I had worked at the bank right after high school and from there -- what was I going to say? When I married I stayed working for another couple of years and then I was pregnant with my first child, my Eddie Jr., so I stayed home, I was a stay at home mother. Shortly after Mr. Harris, Glen Harris came --

TOM RIVERA: The principal of Garfield Elementary School.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right. So he came to the house and Mr. Harris was a very special person and he knew la familia, he knew the Mexican people. [00:27:00] His thought was he had seen me working at the bank, so he knew I knew how to be a secretary, so he was in a bind, and he came to the house and asked Eddie for permission if he would allow me to be his secretary for at least one year, because he was in a really bad bind. Eddie thought about it and he says, well, yeah. And I worked there four years.

TOM RIVERA: For one year -- it was extended to four years.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Extended to four years, yeah. Loved it.

TOM RIVERA: And this was at Garfield Elementary?

NELLIE CORTEZ: It was at Wilson. By that time it was Wilson. Wilson had been a junior high for --

TOM RIVERA: In 1953 Wilson became an elementary school.

NELLIE CORTEZ: I became the -- right after I would say Kelly, but I don't know, someone else, I don't know who it was. [00:28:00]

TOM RIVERA: Yeah, Tony Kelly was at the district office.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Then she had gone out there and they had someone else, and he was not really happy with that, and so he came and asked, and I really enjoyed that. It brought me to the world of school, the school environment, and I knew that was the place that I wanted to be.

TOM RIVERA: Wonderful introduction for the future for you.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Oh, wonderful. Yes, exactly.

TOM RIVERA: Is that when you decided to become a teacher?

NELLIE CORTEZ: No, I had already started my own school at home. (laughs) I think I mentioned to you, I've been a teacher since I was like eight or nine. When we lived on Pine Street there for a while, I loved the teaching, I liked to teach, so I would gather the kids from the park, and I'd tell them okay -- summertime, I'd bring them over and I'd say I'm going to have cookies -- at recess I'm going to have cookies and Kool-Aid. I taught them the alphabet, I taught them how to write their name, and that kind of stuff. [00:29:00] So I know that I'd been a teacher and I should have been a teacher always. Yeah. (laughter) I've had some of the guys from the area that come to me, a lot of the Fernandez's, they would say, "If you hadn't taught us the ABCs, we wouldn't have known them." (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: I'll be darned.

NELLIE CORTEZ: That -- it was fruitful.

TOM RIVERA: It paid off.

NELLIE CORTEZ: It paid off, yeah, for them and for me.

TOM RIVERA: And then finally when did you decide to get your credentials?

NELLIE CORTEZ: After my kids were grown. They were already in like --

TOM RIVERA: Before we go into that, tell me about your kids. How many kids do you have?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I had -- I've had four children, two boys and two girls. I had Eddie Jr., my Lawrence Cortez, and Sharon, and Sylvia. You know that my son [00:30:00] was killed, right? My Lawrence, I lost my --

TOM RIVERA: I had no idea.

NELLIE CORTEZ: I lost my son --

TOM RIVERA: When did that happen?

NELLIE CORTEZ: -- in 2015.

TOM RIVERA: When did it happen?

NELLIE CORTEZ: 2015.

TOM RIVERA: Oh just recently? Two years ago? I'm so sorry. So sorry about that.

NELLIE CORTEZ: He was my artist. He was my -- very creative fellow. That's a little sad.

TOM RIVERA: So your family was comprised of two boys and two girls. Yeah. You mentioned that -- I forgot my train of thought before I interrupted you.

M1: You were asking when she got her -- (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

TOM RIVERA: Yes, being 78 years old --

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yeah, I'm one year older than you are. (laughter) Los viejitos.

TOM RIVERA: When did you decide that this is what I want to do and this is what I --

NELLIE CORTEZ: The fact that [00:31:00] I've always loved school, I knew that I always wanted to be a teacher but things never went that way. Money, finances, and then getting married, and having the children, that added to that. Eventually I thought as soon as I am able to I'm going to do that. Then I heard about the [SABER?] program and I thought oh, this is my chance.

TOM RIVERA: What year was that, Nellie? What year was that?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I wanted to be part of that, but I went to go see Dan [Carrasco?] and he said that I didn't qualify. I went, what, and my heart just broke. I think I went home crying. He said that it was specifically for people that were aides in school and I was not a part of the school at that time. Then a couple of weeks later [00:32:00] Bob Rich -- are you familiar with Bob Rich?

TOM RIVERA: Yes, Bob Rich, yes.

NELLIE CORTEZ: He's such a good guy. I used to work for him as a secretary part-time. He called me and he said, "Nellie, are you still wanting to go to college?" And I said, "Of course." He says, "All right. Get yourself out to Cal State and go see Dr. Garcia." He said he's looking --

TOM RIVERA: Another Colton person.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right. Exactly. He says, "He's looking for people like you." I had Eddie drive me up there because I didn't know how to drive all the way up there. (laughter)

TOM RIVERA: So if you had drove you'd have gotten lost.

NELLIE CORTEZ: (laughs) I would get lost. Anyway, long story short, that changed my life. Once I asked Eddie, "What do you think? Can I do that?" He says, "I know that you've always wanted to go to college and go to Cal State." I said, "I do."

TOM RIVERA: Total support from Eddie, your husband. [00:33:00]

NELLIE CORTEZ: Exactly. At that point, yes. And Ernie just made it so, so easy, and what a great guy. He just helped us along.

TOM RIVERA: He's a Colton guy, that's why.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yeah, exactly. Oh my gosh, yeah, he was such a good supporter, yes, and a wonderful program.

TOM RIVERA: Then you started teaching as a teacher. When did you get your credentials?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I think it was like in 1950-- not fifties, 1979. I mentioned to you that I met you when I made the transfer from Valley College to Cal State.

TOM RIVERA: You were at Valley for a couple of years.

NELLIE CORTEZ: I was there for a year and -- not quite a year and a half. I was -

- I really made use of my time and I had all these classes that I took, doubled up on some [00:34:00] of them, and so I thought okay, I'm ready to transfer. But oh my gosh that was hard.

TOM RIVERA: I can imagine.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Oh that was -- I was still going to Valley and taking those classes just to get them over with and then try to transfer to Cal State and that's when I met you at the steps. I'll tell you I thought what in the world am I doing here and who comes in, this fellow comes in, and he says, "What's the matter?" And I burst into tears and I said, "I don't think I belong here. I need to be home making tortillas." (laughter) And he said, "No, you don't, come on, what do you need?" You walked me back up the stairs to the main office and showed me, okay, you go here, you do this, you do that, and I'll be seeing you. I thought oh my gosh, I can't disappoint [00:35:00] you. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: You know you didn't. You graduated. And you got your credentials when?

NELLIE CORTEZ: What is it?

TOM RIVERA: 1979 you said?

NELLIE CORTEZ: 1979.

TOM RIVERA: You started teaching at Colton.

NELLIE CORTEZ: I started (inaudible) Colton. That's when I went to Terrace Hills.

TOM RIVERA: You started at Terrace Hills Junior High School. Then being there for a couple of years or so?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I was there four years.

TOM RIVERA: Four years and you decided I want to go back to South Colton.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yeah, that was my dream. I'd always wanted to go back to Wilson.

TOM RIVERA: And you've been in South Colton ever since?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Exactly.

TOM RIVERA: Since 1983?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Over fifty-some years.

TOM RIVERA: How many years?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Over fifty-some years. Yeah. Because we lived there -- well, it was Eddie's home, then we went back to live with his parents, they were not well, so we took care of his dad and then his mom. [00:36:00] And then we stayed there for about five years with them and that's when we moved up to Fur, came back, and we said, you know what, I'm not happy here at this part of town.

TOM RIVERA: Before we get into that, you said that you had your own place that you lived, and then you moved into Eddie's parents because they needed to be taken care of, and then after that you look for a house, and you said that you got together with one of the realtors from Colton.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Oh yes.

TOM RIVERA: That you went to look at houses in North Colton. Tell us about that experience.

NELLIE CORTEZ: That was kind of sad. It almost felt like when we were little that they would tell us, no, you can't come in here. You don't belong in here. Especially when I realized [00:37:00] at that point that they were showing us homes that were really bad, and as I pointed out, I said, "My house is even better than this and you're trying to sell this to me?" He had a change of mind and so after that he says, "Come tomorrow and I have some other homes that I want to show you." That's how we ended up getting the house of Fur Street, Fur and Pennsylvania up in North Colton.

TOM RIVERA: Where's that located? I'm not familiar with that area.

NELLIE CORTEZ: It's up on -- at the end of Pennsylvania butts into I believe it's Mill Street. And then it bends into -- and it still goes on and hits Rialto. So we were right in between there.

TOM RIVERA: You said that you were there for a few years?

NELLIE CORTEZ: We were there five years, about five years.

TOM RIVERA: You didn't [00:38:00] get used to being there?

NELLIE CORTEZ: No, we got homesick. I guess that's what it was.

TOM RIVERA: You were only three blocks from South Colton.

NELLIE CORTEZ: I know, I know, but being in that area, having stayed there for so long, I missed it, I missed being in the south side, I really did. We talked it over and we had a beautiful home, it was really nice, and did a lot of changes, a lot of moves to get it better, better garage.

TOM RIVERA: This is where the kids grew up.

NELLIE CORTEZ: This is where Eddie Jr., Eddie Jr. was -- and Lawrence was born there too, but he was only about a year when we moved out, when we went back to K Street. But you know it was different because there were Mexicans there but very few. We had the Henderson's, [00:39:00] we had -- well we had Anglo people living on the front. They were very nice, they treated us -- we were one of the younger ones. Then we had [Amparo?] and they lived on Fifth Street.

TOM RIVERA: Amparo?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I'm trying to think of her last -- [Sasera?]. I think some of her relatives are still there on Fifth Street. But she passed away. They became good friends of ours, in fact they became compadres. Then we had musicians on the other side that played up on Mount Vernon. So we had a mix. We blended right in. We had a fairly nice area. But still it --

TOM RIVERA: The urge to get back to South Colton. [00:40:00]

NELLIE CORTEZ: Exactly.

TOM RIVERA: Now you moved into Eddie's parent's house?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yeah. We went back to that. We had rented -- we had another little house on the side, and we rented that one, and we took the bigger house.

Yeah. It's been home.

TOM RIVERA: You've been a Coltonite from day one.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Forever. (laughter)

TOM RIVERA: And you live in South Colton a few blocks away and five years later came back because I miss Colton, and you've been on K Street ever since.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Ever since, yeah. Except for the time we moved to Grand Terrace where we were your neighbors for a year. We stayed [Harless?] Court.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah, because that's when your house burned down, yeah. During the rebuilding stage you lived here in Grand Terrace.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right.

TOM RIVERA: Well that's okay. [00:41:00] I call Grand Terrace upper south Colton. (laughter) So you were --

NELLIE CORTEZ: Thanks but no thanks.

TOM RIVERA: -- you were still home, you were still home. Nellie, just shifting gears a little bit, we talked about different activities that you were involved with when you were a little girl, what about as a teenager and in high school, what kind of activities did you and the las luisas participate in? (laughter)

NELLIE CORTEZ: Las Luisas. You know, I come from a home that it was very strict. We were not allowed to go out and do stuff. I think Linda, as I said, [Talavera?] was my best friend, but my tía never believed in us going and visiting. She and I were friends across the fence. We'd yell at each other through the little holes of the fence. (laughs) That was our friendship. [00:42:00] I could not go visit.

I think I was allowed to go to [Concheca's?], we read a lot, we always had our books, and we'd go to school.

TOM RIVERA: [Concha?]?

NELLIE CORTEZ: [Concha Mercado?]. Even then my time I spent mostly reading. Of course by that time I had met Eddie, so that took my time too. As far as going out with the girls, even at high school, these gals that I mentioned are my friends from Wilson and at the high school level it was a totally different environment. Somehow I always say that the lord took a hand in my life and guided me to where I was going to be [00:43:00] a benefit to me and to others. Because -- I'm going to get emotional, sorry.

TOM RIVERA: It's okay.

[BREAK IN VIDEO RECORDING]

TOM RIVERA: Nellie, when we left our discussion a few minutes ago, you mentioned that -- I asked you some of the activities that you participated in high school and then you mentioned that you were kind of well-isolated and protected by your family. That's where we left our interview.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right. Going back to activities, I attended school, I came straight home. I didn't have any time to stay for other things or pal around with some of my friends at school. But it was funny [00:44:00] that the friends that I had from the barrio were friends that I didn't see anymore. I got so involved in different types of classes, the accelerated classes -- not of my doing, this is what I'm saying that the lord took over my life because how I -- to this day I don't remember how I got into these college --

TOM RIVERA: Prep courses?

NELLIE CORTEZ: -- prep courses. It had to be someone in the office or the -- I never spoke to a counselor, so it couldn't have been that time. But I got involved in

that and I loved it. I just followed through. Whatever my card said, okay, this is what I'm going to do, this is what I'm taking. It kept me busy, it kept me studying. There was no time for [00:45:00] going out and doing other things. I had to go straight home.

TOM RIVERA: So little time for extracurricular activities.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Exactly, yeah. But I was always in the programs because I guess we had times during school. I was always in the Pan American.

TOM RIVERA: What was the Pan American?

NELLIE CORTEZ: It was showing you know --

TOM RIVERA: Our culture?

NELLIE CORTEZ: -- our culture, yeah, through song. That's when Carlos [Abeutes?] and Eddie [Castorena?] would dance.

TOM RIVERA: They were the Mambo Kings.

NELLIE CORTEZ: The Mambo Kings, exactly, right. [Bob Valasquez?] playing. We were all in there so that was great and I was always allowed to do that. That was one enjoyment.

TOM RIVERA: Did you sing?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I would sing, yes. Dance, sing, whatever. Yeah. And then of course the other people didn't do that, [00:46:00] my other friends wouldn't think of doing something like that. But I got involved with the group. They were all people that took the college course classes and got involved the politics. I ended up -- get this, I ended up being the rep for my grade. How I got that I'll never know.

(laughter) I never said I wanted to do that.

TOM RIVERA: You just happened to be there at the --

NELLIE CORTEZ: I don't know. My name was on the slot and I got to be the sophomore rep at that point. A lot of good things were happening.

TOM RIVERA: You were always a good student. You were always conscientious, and you were hardworking, and I think people realize that from you and they just provided opportunities for you in terms of being involved and doing things that would help you in the future.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yes. For a girl [00:47:00] that never was allowed to go to college, I did a lot of stuff that --

TOM RIVERA: Prepared you for college.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Exactly.

TOM RIVERA: Without knowing it.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Without knowing it, exactly.

TOM RIVERA: You talked about activities at the high school campus, you know, the Pan American activity, what about I know that in Colton, Fiestas Patrias was a big deal.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Oh yeah, yeah.

TOM RIVERA: Tell me about Fiestas Patrias.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Since I'm the dark person I was always chosen for -- and again, I don't know how I got involved in that one, but I was always the one that held the Mexican flag in the parade. Then Linda, being light-complected, she was the one that held the U.S. flag. (laughs) We were always the ones. Yeah, we got involved in that. That was wonderful.

TOM RIVERA: Now who were the people --

NELLIE CORTEZ: I missed all of that.

TOM RIVERA: -- that got you involved [00:48:00] in Fiestas Patrias?

NELLIE CORTEZ: It had to be Señor [Padilla?], Señor Luque, all the leaders of our side of town, yeah.

TOM RIVERA: What about getting back to -- skipping back to the church,

people that helped Father Valencia, the Padilla girls, the Padilla sisters, do you remember them?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: What were their names?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Well at my -- I'm older than they are, but it was Terry, Constant -- well Terry Padilla Constant (inaudible). Then they've got two other sisters that are still involved in --

TOM RIVERA: What about their aunts?

NELLIE CORTEZ: The tías (inaudible). Yeah, yeah, yeah.

TOM RIVERA: [The Maria?]. Tell me about them.

NELLIE CORTEZ: That's the one I remember. She was very active in the Catholic Church and very bossy, make sure that we behaved [00:49:00] and that we were on time whenever we had to be there, and that kind of stuff. Yeah, she was very involved in the church. Of course Mr. Luque and Mr. Padilla, they always looked for an opportunity to help. They were that kind of people and leaders and I'll always remember that. I think that I shared with you that they had come to ask permission for me to go to college and my tía had said no. That I couldn't do that.

TOM RIVERA: Who came to get permission?

NELLIE CORTEZ: It was Mr. Padilla, Mr. Luque, and --

TOM RIVERA: They --

NELLIE CORTEZ: It's a committee, you know, because they had sent a -- they had given me a scholarship of some sort, yeah. I think it was like a hundred dollars or something like that. [00:50:00] I was so excited because I thought I'll go to Valley College. Then when my tía said no, you can't, you're supposed to work, well that kind of burst my bubble. I thought well, I'm going to take a class anyway in my spare time whenever I can I'll do that. So I took the bus, and I went to Valley, and

registered, and then I knew that I wasn't going to be able to do it. I had other things at home.

TOM RIVERA: But those community people advocated for you --

NELLIE CORTEZ: They did.

TOM RIVERA: -- and they wanted you to continue your education.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Because I had spent some of the money on a book, I felt so guilty about that, so I went back and I returned the money, and I said I can't use it, give it someone else. Yeah, I remember that.

TOM RIVERA: Now at the Fiestas Patrias, do you remember any of the girls that ran for queen? [00:51:00]

NELLIE CORTEZ: I know that Martinez gal was one -- [Celia?] Martinez, beautiful girl. In fact I just saw pictures of them on Facebook showing them now. Yeah, they were -- I can't name them.

TOM RIVERA: What did you have to do to became the queen of the dieciseis de septiembre?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Sell your tickets I suppose. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: Sell tickets.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Sell tickets I guess. It was more the popular vote in that case, yeah.

TOM RIVERA: Did they have big --

NELLIE CORTEZ: Oh was there --

TOM RIVERA: -- after the girl was announced that this was the queen for the fiestas program, did they have a big doings?

NELLIE CORTEZ: They did. They had -- they paraded them up on the 16th of September parade. Those were the best times, especially for the kids because we could stay up all night on that. But yeah, they had -- well and the [00:52:00] Padilla

lady, she always had --

TOM RIVERA: Tula.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Tula. She always had poetry or some sort of declaration that someone had to learn and read it out loud, and some dancers, kids that would dance. It was a big thing.

TOM RIVERA: It was a big thing.

NELLIE CORTEZ: It was a big thing. I looked forward to that too. As soon as school let out, that's where we ended up. (laughter) It was remarkable.

TOM RIVERA: They had the plaza there, they closed the street, and then they would make the -- they would have different entertainment. Then they had dancing also.

NELLIE CORTEZ: The dancing went on and on. Yes. That was where the Sombrero Market is now.

TOM RIVERA: Yes, on N Street. On La Cadena and 7th Street. Yeah.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right.

M1: N Street. [00:53:00]

NELLIE CORTEZ: M Street?

M1: N.

NELLIE CORTEZ: N as in Nellie? (laughter) That's how I remember it.

TOM RIVERA: Still a teacher. (laughter) Anyway, you mentioned community leaders, Nellie. You mentioned a couple of them. Tell me, who were the community leaders in South Colton?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Well at my -- when I was younger it had to be Mr. Padilla. Okay, Manuel Padilla. Mr. Luque.

TOM RIVERA: Mr. Pete Luque Sr.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Pete Luque Sr. Uh-huh. And I know that Caldera that had all

that property, he was involved in that too. Later on as you mentioned about veterans coming back and then helping the community, is it [Leva?], they were very involved in that too.

TOM RIVERA: I don't remember his first name but I do remember the last name, [00:54:00] Leva.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Then there were a lot of brothers. Yeah. They all became involved in that. But I remember mostly the Padilla and Mr. Luque because they were always around and deciding on we can do this, or we can do that, and so -- then we would -- we had even classes up at the Caldera Building.

TOM RIVERA: Across the street from Soldero.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right.

TOM RIVERA: What kind of classes did you have?

NELLIE CORTEZ: That's what I'm trying to think because we used to go to meetings up there but I really don't remember now.

TOM RIVERA: Was it voting or supporting a candidate?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I think that's what it was, the support of the candidate. Uh-huh, that we would have that. Yeah. You know it's all down, right?

TOM RIVERA: Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes. Things have changed quite a bit.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Because they had a building there still for a long time. It's [00:55:00] all gone.

TOM RIVERA: Because that used to be the Fidel Hernandez Post 754 headquarters where they bet, yeah.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Maybe that's how the award was given or something. It was at the junior high for me.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah, yeah. Nellie, you were quite a student back then.

NELLIE CORTEZ: I always thought I was so dumb. (laughter) You never think

that you're smart enough.

TOM RIVERA: We kind of mentioned, you mentioned that you went to stores downtown Colton, and were kind of not welcome.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right.

TOM RIVERA: Not welcomed. Were you aware that we were living in a -- South Colton was a segregated [00:56:00] community from the larger community? Were you aware because of de facto segregation that that's the way things were. I know we accepted that's the way things were and we went along with the program.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right.

TOM RIVERA: Were you aware that we were separate?

NELLIE CORTEZ: As a teenager, around that time, you felt it. I was always uncomfortable about that. It bothered me of the color of my skin because that kind of triggered things and I kind of just stayed away. If I was not sure of whether they would let me in, I just went around somewhere else.

TOM RIVERA: So you would evade feeling badly.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Uh-huh, right. I worked at -- in my senior year, I worked at the Hunter's -- remember Hunter's where everybody went for [00:57:00] the ice cream sodas?

TOM RIVERA: Yes, yes.

NELLIE CORTEZ: All right. I don't know how I got involved in that one, but I ended up washing dishes there. Then I could see through the window and I could see all the güeros all having a good time, and I'm like and I'm doing the dishes?

(laughter)

M1: Where was Hunter's located?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Hunter's was -- oh, let's see. Where -- on this side of H Street, I think right around Rexall.

TOM RIVERA: Yes.

NELLIE CORTEZ: The drug store, yeah, on that side, yeah. Facing the La Cadena. It was a hangout.

M1: It was at the corner of H and La Cadena kind of?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yeah, not the corner [00:58:00] but close to the corner, uh-huh. That was the place to go. Yeah.

M1: Is that where that Larson's Drug area, kind of in that area now?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Across the street from it.

M1: Oh, across the street.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right. Where Larson's was used to be a drug store and anybody would go in there, I mean, the guy was so blind I guess he never knew the difference. (laughter) He was a nice fellow. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: Anyway, you were a dishwasher at that establishment.

NELLIE CORTEZ: At that establishment, yes, and I resented it very much. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: You know Nellie, you have a tough skin because you were able to weather all those things that you were exposed to, but at the same time you would put your best foot forward and continue.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Ay-yay-yay.

TOM RIVERA: Yes, you're a tough cookie. You're a tough cookie, [00:59:00] yeah. Your husband Eddie, Eddie Cortez. Eddie Cortez became the first Mexican American person that was hired by the Colton Fire Department. How did that affect him and how did that affect you and your family?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Positive because for one thing, Eddie had never gone to college, had been a worker always, right, but never had -- and even then in the jobs that he had, he always rose up, and he always became the leader. He was a

supervisor, he was this guy, so he was a hard working fellow. It just so happens that at that particular time, [01:00:00] I guess things were getting very agitated as to why Colton people, Mexican Colton people, weren't involved in the doings and the jobs that were being offered. So when they had a meeting at Wilson School, in fact --

TOM RIVERA: What year was this now?

NELLIE CORTEZ: I want to say -- I'm terrible about that.

TOM RIVERA: In the 1970s?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Probably. I had invited my comadre Jessie [Barra?] and she's related to Frankie Gonzalez's family and Phil?

TOM RIVERA: Yes, yes.

NELLIE CORTEZ: She's my comadre. She said, "I'll go with you, Nellie, to this meeting that they're having." She and I went up there and then it got -- like I said, it got kind of agitated, people were saying [01:01:00] why haven't you picked a Mexicano, how come there's not enough policías that are Mexicano, and this or that. Then somebody said how about the -- Jessie was the one that said, "Well why don't have you have Mexican firemen?" And so Temby, who was very against that -

TOM RIVERA: Temby the chief.

NELLIE CORTEZ: The chief at that time. Kind of hemmed and hawed on that one. Then they said -- he said, "I don't think that we have anybody qualifying for that. And besides, no Mexican American fellow has ever applied for it or asked to be a fireman." Then Jessie and I stood up, "What?" I got the nerve because of Jessie. She was that type of a woman. So we both stood up and said, "We have a candidate." [01:02:00] His face turned red. He says, "What do you mean?" "If we send you a candidate, will you accept his application? And if he qualifies, will he be

hired?" So he had no choice and he says, "Well, of course." And we sent him Eddie. That's part of it. But of course he had to qualify because of his physical, and taking the test, and going through the oral examination, whatever they had to do. It was a tough test. He had never been a physical person. Jessie and I looked at each other, oh my god, what have we done? (laughter) And that's if Eddie is really willing to do that. He had no idea what we had done and how the meeting had turned. Like I said, the lord blessed us, and Eddie ended up [01:03:00] trying for it.

TOM RIVERA: Being a successful candidate.

NELLIE CORTEZ: And he was a successful candidate. It changed our life completely really.

TOM RIVERA: How did it affect you guys?

NELLIE CORTEZ: Monetary was another factor. Just the feeling that it gave us that we're part of the city, that we can do good not just for them but for us.

TOM RIVERA: For everybody.

NELLIE CORTEZ: And I think this is what Eddie and I have always said, we stayed here, we worked for the people, we want to represent them and make sure that they get a good deal.

TOM RIVERA: Deal and services from the city.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Right. Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: And how did the kids react to this?

NELLIE CORTEZ: They were very proud of him. Yeah, they were very happy about him being a fireman. It was kind of like a prestigious thing for them, my dad's a fireman. [01:04:00] And you know what, we had so many kids that felt oh, we can be a fireman too, so it gives them hope too that they can be -- (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

TOM RIVERA: He was a good role model for the kids.

NELLIE CORTEZ: And you know that there's been several young men that have come and asked Eddie and he's always been willing to help, and give them advice, this is what you do, this is what you -- you know, that kind of stuff. We had [Parra?], Ernie Parra from our street and we just saw him and he was wearing his shirt, I don't know what county he's in, but I know that he became one. He was very anxious about finding out more stuff and so he's done that. There's been several that have -- Delgado, Joe Delgado, he was -- his son came and then Joe himself came and asked [01:05:00] Eddie stuff. Yeah. It's affected other people.

TOM RIVERA: He's been a wonderful for the family but also for the entire community.

NELLIE CORTEZ: It has, yeah. And then from then it was Frankie Gonzalez, John Rivera. Being a teacher, being a fireman, and being Mexican, has really paid off.

TOM RIVERA: You've been a teacher for a long time at Wilson Garfield Elementary Schools.

NELLIE CORTEZ: That's my home away from home.

TOM RIVERA: That's your home away from home. (laughter) But what are some of the advice that you give your not only a little kid but also some of the students that you know throughout the years?

NELLIE CORTEZ: My love of school shows and I try to instill that you need to do [01:06:00] your homework, that if you're planning to be a doctor, a nurse, a school teacher, I say, you better be a school teacher. I give them my little plug. I say, it's possible. I share with them my life when I was young, the things that I wanted to do and I thought were impossible, and I said, but your love of education, of school, starts right here in first grade, in second grade. Then you'll get those good things that you want for you. Because if you're not educated in this world, it's going to be

really hard. I'm always saying that. I tell them, this is my school. I want to be buried in the Quad, don't forget. (laughter) They go, "Teacher!" And I go, "Yes, I want to be buried in the Quad." Come out and go did you do [01:07:00] your homework. (laughter) [And you know that?].

TOM RIVERA: We have to get a committee together and address the School Board. (laughter) Now Nellie, the last question, the best part or the best thing about living and being in Colton, what would you describe would be the best experience that you've felt being a Coltonite?

NELLIE CORTEZ: A Coltonite, yeah. Secure, very secure being on the south side. I think that's why we came back. Both Eddie and I felt a lot more comfortable, more secure, and happier that we're South Colton. I always say that when I come in, "South side!" There's good people on the south side. Yeah, they're all over but there's good people in the south side. [01:08:00]

TOM RIVERA: Not only the feeling of secure and being happy, but a big part of you since always, since you were baptized you said.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Exactly. Yeah. I've traveled a lot. I've been to Europe many times and I've been to many countries and places, but it's always good to come back to Colton.

TOM RIVERA: That's what I tell people, I want to go home.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Yes, exactly, you've been gone, I want to go home.

TOM RIVERA: When I got to Bloomington I get lost, Nellie. (laughter) (inaudible) a traveler like you are. But Nellie, thank you very much for being with us this afternoon.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Thank you.

TOM RIVERA: Thank you for sharing your life and some of the stories and also your many, many successes. Again, thank you so much for being with us this

afternoon. Thank you.

NELLIE CORTEZ: Thank you, Tom.

End of Interview:

[01:08:58]