

THE DAY THE POLICE RIOTED! REMEMBERING 32 YEARS AGO!

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AS I APPROACH THE AGE OF 60 YEARS, I CAN STILL VIVIDLY REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED (PERSONALLY AND POLITICALLY) ON AUGUST 29, 1970 WHEN 20,000 TO 40,000 CHICANO'S TOOK TO THE STREETS IN LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA TO PROTEST THE WAR IN VIETNAM.

CHICANO'S IN THE LATE 60'S AND EARLY 70'S WERE KNOWN AS THE "FORGOTTEN, INVISIBLE, OR SILENT," MINORITY TO U.S SOCIETY, ITS POLITICANS, POLICY MAKERS, AND SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONS. BUT THINGS WERE STARTING TO HAPPEN AND RAPIDLY CHANGING IN MEXICAN AMERICANS COMMUNITIES. THE SO CALLED "SLEEPING GIANT" (AS CHICANO'S WERE REFERRED TO) WAS STARTING TO AWAKEN.

- CESAR CHAVEZ AND THE UNITED FARM WORKERS UNION HAD LAUNCHED A BOYCOTT OF TABLE GRAPES IN AN EFFORT TO ORGANIZE THE HISTORICALLY UNORGANIZED FARMWORKERS.
- BERT CORONA, WAS ATTEMPTING TO ORGANIZE THE TRULY UNORGANIZABLE...THE MEXICAN UNDOCUMENTED WORKER.
- ABE TAPIA, PRESIDENT OF THE MEXICAN AMERICAN POLITICAL ASSOCIATION (MAPA) WAS URGING CHICANOS TO BECOME POLITICALLY INVOLVED.
- JOSE ANGEL GUTIERREZ, IN TEXAS HAD ORGANIZED A THIRD POLITICAL PARTY, LA RAZA UNIDA.
- RODOLFO "CORKY" GONZALES IN COLORADO HAD DECLARED THAT CHICANOS WERE A NATION (AZTLAN).
- REIES TIJERNA IN NEW MEXICO HAD PICKED UP THE GUN (AND WAS BEING CHASED BY THE U.S. NATIONAL GUARD), OVER THE ISSUE OF LAND!
- THOUSAND OF CHICANO WERE PROTESTING, MARCHING, AND BOYCOTING OVER ISSUES OF RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION.

IT WAS AGAINST THIS BACKGROUND THAT THE AUGUST 29 CHICANO MORTATORIUM AGAINST THE WAR IN VIETNAM WAS BORN, AND HOW I BECAME PART OF IT.

IN 1970, I WAS 27 YEARS OF AGE, MARRIED, HAD TWO CHILDREN, AND WAS A PRINTER. I HAD BEEN POLITICALLY INVOLVED IN THE CHICANO MOVEMENT FOR 2 YEARS AND WAS PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL CITY CHAPTER OF MAPA. MY INVOLVMENT UP TO THAT POINT HAD BEEN IN ORGANIZING PROTESTS FOR THE BOYCOTT OF GRAPES IN SUPPORT OF THE UNITED FARM WORKERS, WORKING ON LOCAL ISSUES (POLICE BRUTALITY, IMMIGRATION, ZONING, YOUTH) AND ELECTORAL POLITICS.

SINCE MAPA WAS THE ONLY POLITICAL ORGANIZATION WE ORGANIZED AND RAN A LARGE NUMBER OF CAMPAIGNS FOR LOCAL CANDIDATES. DURING THAT PERIOD, I ALSO MANAGED THE INITIAL SUCESSFUL CAMPAIGN TO ELECT PETER CHACON TO THE CALIFORNIA STATE ASSEMBLY.

IN 1965, PRESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON HAD DECLARED A POLICE ACTION IN VIETNAM. DARK AND FOREBODING WAR CLOUDS (JUST LIKE TODAY) WERE PRESENT IN EVERY CHICANO BARRIO THROUGHOUT THE SOUTHWEST.

CHICANOS, AT THAT TIME COMPRIZED BUT 6% OF THIS NATION'S POPULATION, BUT MADE UP 20% OF THE CAUSALITIES IN VIETNAM! YOUNG WHITES STARTED TO RECEIVE COLLEGE DEFERMENTS, AND WHITE CONTROLLED DRAFT BOARDS BEGIN TO DRAFT (IN RECORD NUMBERS) POOR PEOPLE, BLACKS, AND ESPECIALLY CHICANOS FOR VIETNAM.

AFTER FIVE YEARS OF WAR, REALITY FINALLY HIT HOME. YOUNG CHICANOS WERE DYING IN OBSCENE NUMBERS, AND NUMEROUS "BODY BAGS" CARRYING YOUNG DEAD CHICANOS WERE BEING RETURNED TO THE HOMES OF GRIEVING FAMILIES THRUOUT THE U.S.

THOSE OF US WHO WERE INVOLVED IN THE CHICANO MOVEMENT RECOILED IN ANGER AND CALLED FOR PROTESTS AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICY IN SENDING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE TO DIE IN VIETNAM. IT HAD ALWAYS BEEN THE MOVEMENT'S POLITICAL POSITION THAT THE WHITE RACIST SYSTEM HAD MADE CHICANO'S STRANGERS IN THEIR OWN LAND, PLACED THEM LAST IN JOBS, EDUCATIONS AND RIGHTS, BUT HAD ALWAYS PLACED THEM FIRST TO DIE IN ITS WARS!

AT THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS A "GENERATIONAL" DIVISION IN OUR COMMUNITY, OVER THE ANTI-WAR POSITION. BITTER DISCUSSIONS AND ARGUMENTS IN COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES FOLLOWED. STRONG OPPOSITION TO THE ANTI-WAR POSITION CAME MAINLY FROM THE MEN WHOM WE ADMIRERD, AND LOOKED UP TO, OUR GRANDFATHERS, FATHERS, UNCLES AND OLDER BROTHERS. THERE WAS A HISTORY, AND A LONG PROUD TRADITION OF MILTARY SERVICE IN THE CHICANO COMMUNITY. MANY HAD PROUDLY SERVED (MY OWN FATHER INCLUDED) WITH DISTINCTION AND HAD DIED IN WORLD WAR II AND KOREA. MEXICAN AMERICANS WERE THE MOST DECORATED AND HAD WON THE MOST MEDALS OF HONORS OF ANY ETHNIC GROUP. TO THE MEN OF THOSE GENERATIONS, (WHO HAD NEVER BEEN POLITICAL), SERVICE IN THE MILITARY EQUATED, "MACHISMO." MANY OF MY OWN FRIENDS SERVED AND DIED IN VIETNAM. THE OLDER GENERATION COULD NOT UNDERSTAND WHY (IF WE WERE MEN) WE WERE NOT GOING TO ENLIST AND SERVE (AS THEY HAD) IN VIETNAM. AS THE WAR WORE ON, MANY OF THE SAME VETERANS WHO HAD OPPOSED THE ANTI-WAR POSITION CHANGED, AND SUPPORTED OUR POSITION.

IN SAN DIEGO AS IN OTHER AREA'S, NUMEROUS MEETINGS, CONFERENCES AND "MINI" DEMOSTRATIONS WERE HELD TO PREPARE FOR LOS ANGELES.

FROM THE BEGINNING, THE DEMOSTRATION WAS TO BE A PEACEFUL PROTEST, TO SEEK REDRESS FROM THE U.S. GOVERNMENT, UNDER RIGHTS THAT WERE SUPPOSEDLY, PROTECTED AND GUARANTEED BY THE U.S. CONSTITUTION AND BILL OF RIGHTS.

AUGUST 29, 1970 FINALLY ARRIVED, WE (THREE OTHER INDIVIDUALS AND MYSELF)_ARRIVED IN LOS ANGELES ON SATURDAY MORNING AROUND 7:00 A.M. THE FIRST THING I WITNESSED, WAS SOMETHING THAT I HAD NEVER SEEN BEFORE. THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS OF CHICANOS FROM ALL OVER THE U.S., SOME FROM NEW MEXICO, TEXAS, COLORADO, ARIZONA, AND THE MIDWEST, WHO HAD ALL GATHERED FOR A POLITICAL EVENT. FIVE HUNDRED TO ONE THOUSAND PERSONS FROM SAN DIEGO ATTENDED THE DEMOSTRATION.

DEPENDING ON WHOM YOU SPEAK TO TODAY, TWENTY TO FORTY THOUSANDS CHICANO'S (PARENTS, CHILDREN, STUDENTS, SENIORS, WORKING PEOPLE, AND ACTIVISTS) FROM THRUOUT THE U.S., (JOINED BY PERSONS FROM MEXICO AND PUERTO RICO) MARCHED ON THAT DAY.

THE DEMOSTRATION TURNED OUT TO BE THE LARGEST PROTEST TO BE ORGANIZED BY CHICANOS IN THEIR 130 YEARS HISTORY AS A CONQUERED PEOPLE IN THE U.S.

I REMEMBER THAT THE MARCH STARTED LATE (AROUND 10:00 OR 11:00 A.M.), AND THAT IT WAS A VERY HOT DAY. AS WE WALKED, SOME PEOPLE WERE BEHIND THE BANNER OF THE VIRGIN DE GUADALUPE; OTHERS CARRIED MAPA, BROWN BERETS, MECHA, CRUSADE FOR JUSTICE, UFW, ETC, BANNERS. WE ALL WALKED IN UNITY, AND I FELT THAT MOST OF US WERE MARCHING TO END A WAR THAT WAS DESTROYING OUR MOST PRECIOUS HERTIAGE -OUR YOUTH.

ALONG THE ROUTE PEOPLE ON THE SIDES WERE YELLING WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT, AND MANY JOINED THE PROCESSION. AFTER 5 LONG MILES WE ARRIVED (AROUND 2 OR 3 P.M.?) AT LAGUNA (NOW SALAZAR PARK). PEOPLE WERE TIRED AND WERE RESTING ON THE GRASS. THE SCENE APPEARED TO ME, TO BE JUST LIKE A GIANT FAMILY PINIC. PEOPLE CONTINUED TO POUR INTO THE PARK AND ALL WERE WAITING FOR THE CULTURAL EVENTS AND SPEAKERS TO BEGIN.

WHILE WAITING, I ASKED A FRIEND IF HE WANTED TO GO AND GET SOMETHING TO DRINK. WE JOURNEYED TO A LIQUOR STORE BY THE PARK AND WHILE THERE WE NOTICED THAT SOME INDIVIDUALS WERE LEAVING THE STORE WITHOUT PAYING FOR THEIR MERCHANDISE. AS WE TRAVELED BACK, I REMEMBER POINTING OUT TO MY FRIEND THAT HUNDREDS OF SHERIFFS' AND POLICE OFFICERS WERE STATIONED ACROSS THE STREET ON WHITTER BLVD. BEING NAIVE, BOTH OF US THOUGH IT ODD, BUT NOT THREATENING SO WE CONTINUED INTO THE PARK.

AS WE SAT DOWN WE HEARD AND THEN SAW A COMMOTION COMING FROM THE DIRECTION WHERE WE HAD JUST LEFT. WE COULD SEE THAT THE SHERIFF AND POLICE WERE STARTING TO LINE UP. SUDDENDLY WITHOUT ANY PROVOCATION THE SHERIFF AND POLICE BEGAN TO ADVANCE ON THE PEACEFUL CROWD. AT THE TIME, MOST OF THE CROWD, WHICH WAS IN FRONT OF THE PARK, HAD ABSOLUTLEY NO IDEA OR KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT WAS HAPPENING.

AT ONE POINT, SECURITY (THE BROWN BERETS) RUSHED FORWARD AND ATTEMPTED TO EXPLAIN TO THE POLICE THAT EVERYTHING WAS UNDER CONTROL. BUT IT WAS NO USE; A FULL FLEDGED INSTIGATED POLICE RIOT WAS NOW UNDER WAY. THE BROWN BERETS WERE ATTACKED AND BEATEN.

AS THE POLICE ADVANCED, I WITNESSED SCENES THAT I WILL NEVER FORGET. BEFORE MY EYES, HUNDRED'S OF OUR PEOPLE, CHILDREN, WOMAN, YOUNG AND OLD PERSONS WERE BEING BEATEN, TEAR GASSED, MAIMED, AND ARRESTED.

THE POLICE AND SHERIFF DEPUTIES APPEARED TO BE TOTALLY OUT OF CONTROL AND CRAZED WITH A DESIRE TO HURT, MAIM AND KILL CHICANOS.

MANY OF US REMEMBERED THE ZOOT SUIT RIOTS, AND IT WAS 1940 ALL OVER AGAIN!

IN SELF DEFENSE CHICANOS, WITNESSING WHAT WAS HAPPENING, AND SUFFERING FROM 130 YEARS OF OPPRESION, RACISM, AND DISCRIMINATION STOOD UP, AND FOUGHT BACK.

I REMEMBER AT ONE POINT THE BRIGHT SKY SUDDENLY TURNING BLACK BECAUSE OF THE NUMBER OF OBJECTS THAT WERE BEING THROWN BACK AT THE POLICE. PEOPLE WERE THROWING BOTTLES, CANS, DIRT, STICKS AND ANYTHING THEY COULD GET THEIR HANDS ON TO PROTECT THEMSELVES.

PEOPLE WERE MAD AND THERE WAS FIERCE HAND-TO-HAND FIGHTING. YOUNG CHICANOS WERE GOING UP TO THE POLICE, LANDING ONE GOOD BODY BLOW KNOWING THAT THE POLICE WOULD IMMEDIATELY CLUB THEM DOWN. A LOT OF PEOPLE WERE BEING MAZED, BEATEN AND ARRESTED.

FOR A WHILE THE CROWD APPEARED TO HAVE THE UPPER HAND AND PUSHED (TWO OR THREE TIMES) THE POLICE BACK. HOWEVER AFTER WHAT SEEMED TO BE AN HOUR THE POLICE REGAINED CONTROL.

IT WAS THERE THAT I LEARNED A LESSON THAT I HAVE NEVER FORGOTTEN TO THIS DAY. EVEN THOUGH THERE WERE THOUSANDS OF CHICANOS, AND ONLY HUNDREDS OF THE POLICE, THEY HAD SOMETHING WE DIDN'T... ORGANIZATION.

AS I STOOD IN THE PARK AROUND THE LITTER AND MAYHEM, I SAW THAT THE POLICE WERE LINING UP IN FORMATION AND SEEMED TO BE WAITING FOR SOMETHING TO HAPPEN. LATER I FOUND OUT, THAT THE POLICE WERE SIMPLY GAUGING THE DIRECTION AS TO WHICH WAY THE WIND WAS BLOWING. WHILE I STOOD THERE I SAW WHAT APPEARED TO BE A CAN, LAND 3 OR 4 FEET FROM ME. I REMEMBER STARING AT THE CAN, AND SECONDS LATER, THE CAN EXPLODED. IMMEDIATELY I KNEW WHAT IT WAS, TEAR GAS. I REMEMBER AFTER THE TEAR GAS CAN EXPLODED, THAT IT MADE EVERYONE, INCLUDING MYSELF; CRY UNCLE. PEOPLE THEN STARTED TO RETREAT TO A RESIDENTIAL SIDE STREET, WHERE PEOPLE AT THOSE HOMES WERE PULLING OUT GARDEN HOSES TO ALLOW THOSE OF US WHO HAD BEEN TEAR GASSED TO WASH THE POISON OF OUR FACES.

AFTER WASHING UP, WE LOCATED EVERYONE IN OUR PARTY, AND PROCEEDED TO WHITTER BLVD. FIERCE FIGHTING WAS STILL GOING ON. I REMEMBER, A BLACK AND WHITE POLICE CRUISER TRAVELING ON WHITTER BLVD. AFTER IT HAD TRAVELED ONE SHORT BLOCK; THE CAR HAD BEEN COMPLETELY DESTROYED BY THE ANGRY CROWD.

SINCE WE HAD NO IDEA WHERE WE WERE AT, OR HOW WE WERE GOING TO GET BACK TO OUR CAR, WE STARTED TO WALK DOWN WHITTER BLVD. HUNDREDS OF PERSONS WERE ALSO WALKING. WHILE WALKING, WE STARTED TO SEE UNDERCOVER POLICE COMING OUT FROM THE SIDES OF THE STREETS WITH GUNS DRAWN, SHOOTING UP IN THE AIR, OR AT PEOPLE. AFTER WALKING A DISTANCES, A KIND HEARTED INDIVIDUAL WHO I BELIEVE WAS FROM TEXAS ASKED US IF WE NEEDED A RIDE. WITHOUT HESITATION ALL OF US PILED IN. WE ASKED HIM TO DRIVE US TO THE MAPA HEADQUARTER ON BROOKLYN AVENUE.

UPON ENTERING THE MAPA OFFICE, I REMEMBER ABE TAPIA CALLING ME INTO A ROOM IN THE BACK AND INFORMING ME THAT A PRESS CONFERENCE TO DENOUNCE THE "POLICE RIOT," WAS GOING TO BE HELD SHORTLY. IN THAT SAME ROOM I SAW BERT CORONA SPEAKING TO RICARDO ROMO (ENDORSED BY MAPA) WHO WAS RUNNING FOR GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA UNDER THE PEACE AND FREEDOM PARTY. RICARDO HAD A BANDAGE ON HIS HEAD AND WAS BLEEDING PROFUSELY FROM A HIT ON THE HEAD.

AT THE PRESS CONFERENCE BERT CORONA, AND ABE TAPIA LAMBASTED THE POLICE FOR THE UNPROVOKED ATTACKS OF OUR PEOPLE, AND THE POLITICAL SYSTEM FOR THE DEATH OF OUR YOUTH IN VIETNAM. IT WAS THEN THAT I HEARD THE NEWS THAT PEOPLE HAD BEEN SHOT AND 3 INDIVIDUALS, (ANGEL DIAZ, LYNN WARD, AND LA TIMES JOURNALIST RUBEN SALAZAR), HAD BEEN MURDERED BY THE POLICE AND SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT.

OUR GROUP CONTINUED OUR INQUIRES, TO DETERMINE IF ANY OF OUR PEOPLE FROM SAN DIEGO WERE MISSING, ARRESTED, OR HURT. AFTER MAKING SURE THAT EVERYONE WAS SAFE, WE DEPARTED FROM LOS ANGELES AT AROUND 6:30 P.M. I REMEMBER AS WE GOT ON TO INTERSTATE 5, TO HEAD BACK TO SAN DIEGO, THAT I LOOKED BACK AND SAW THAT EAST LOS ANGELES WAS BURNING.

WE ARRIVED IN SAN DIEGO AT APPROXIMATELY 9:30 P.M. SHORTLY AFTER, I RECEIVED A PHONE CALL FROM A LOCAL TV STATION (CHANNEL 10), ASKING IF I COULD COME DOWN TO THE STATION TO DO AN INTERVIEW, AS TO WHAT HAPPENED IN LOS ANGELES. ON TELEVISION I DENOUNCED THE ATTACK OF THE MARCHERS BY THE POLICE, LABELING IT A "POLICE RIOT," AND CALLED FOR AN END TO THE WAR IN VIETNAM. I REMEMBER THAT AFTER THE AUGUST 29, 1970, "POLICE RIOT," THINGS WERE NEVER THE SAME FOR CHICANO MOVEMENT ACTIVIST. MANY INDIVIDUALS FEARFUL OF POLICE VIOLENCE AND GOVERNMENT'S SURVEILLANCE LEFT THE MOVEMENT, AND NEVER RETURNED. A LARGE NUMBER, SIMPLY BUCKLED DOWN (TODAY'S HISPANIC MOVEMENT) AND STARTED TO "WORK WITHIN THE SYSTEM." WHILE OTHER'S, WHO WITNESSED THE EVENTS OF THAT DAY, BECAME ANGRIER, LOST THEIR FEAR, AND HAD THEIR POLITICAL RESOLVE, STRENGTHEN, AND CONTINUED THE STRUGGLE.

AS FOR MYSELF, I CONTINUED WITH ORGANIZATIONS SUCH AS LA RAZA UNIDA, CASA, COMMITTEE ON CHICANO RIGHTS, THAT DEALT WITH THE AGE OLD ISSUES OF POLITICS, IMMIGRATION, POLICE BRUTALITY, ETC. TODAY I AM STILL A PRINTER, MARRIED AND STILL RESIDE IN NATIONAL CITY, CALIFORNIA. ALONG WITH A FEW OTHERS, WE CONTINUE (IN A DIFFERENT WAY) TO FIGHT THE SAME POLITICAL STRUGGLES WE HAVE FOUGHT FOR THE LAST 35 YEARS.

32 LONG YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE AUGUST 29, 1970 MORTATORIUM. FOR OTHER'S, AND MYSELF THE POLITICAL QUESTION REMAINS, HAS ANYTHING CHANGED? OBVIOUSLY, SOMETHINGS HAVE CHANGED. WE ARE NO LONGER THE "SLEEPING GIANT," OR A "FORGOTTEN, INVISIBLE, OR SILENT," MINORITY. IN FACT, IN THE VERY NEAR FUTURE WE WILL BE THE LARGEST ETHNIC GROUP IN THE U.S. ALSO, IN 2002 WE HAVE MORE "HISPANIC" INDIVIDUALS IN "SYSTEM" POSITIONS, SUCH AS POLITICANS, PROFESSORS, PRICIPALS, COUNSELORS, PHD'S, STUDENTS, ETC., THAN EVER BEFORE.

AND YET FOR ALL THE "COSMETIC" CHANGES, THINGS TODAY FOR THE MAJORITY OF PERSONS OF MEXICAN ANCESTRY ARE WORST THAN IN 1970. THE THOUSAND'S OF "HISPANIC" POLITCANS ARE NO BETTER THAN MEXICO'S "PRI" POLITICANS. WE ARE THE POOREST ETHNIC GROUP IN THE U.S. OUR YOUTH ARE STILL FORCED OUT OF SCHOOLS AT A 50% DROP OUT RATE, AND OUR MEDIUM EDUCATION IS EIGHTH YEARS. IN FACT, WE HAVE MORE OF OUR YOUTH IN PRISONS THAN IN COLLEGES. THE AGE OLD PROBLEMS OF UNACCOUNTABLE POLITICANS, POLICE BRUTALITY, HIGH UNEMPLOYEMENT, YOUTH, SENIORS, HOUSING, LACK OF MEDICAL CARE, DEATH AT THE U.S./MEXICO BORDER AND GROSS VIOLATIONS OF OUR RIGHTS CONTINUE TO PLAGUE US.

TO ME, AS I LOOK BACK AT THE AUGUST 29, 1970 MORTATRIUM WAS BOTH A HISTORICAL AND DEFINING EVENT IN MY POLITICAL AND PERSONAL LIFE. THE DEMOSTRATION WAS ALSO A POLITICAL LESSON OF OUR PEOPLE CONFRONTING A PROBLEM (THE WAR), WITH THE SPIRIT OF SELF-DETERMINATION. FOR THE CHICANO MOVEMENT IT WAS, AS ACTIVIST/AUTHOR ERNESTO VIGIL STATED, "THE MORAL HIGH GROUND."

TODAY, AS CHICANOS PREPARE TO COMMEMORATE THE MORTATIUM, I FEEL IT IS INCUMBENT UPON THOSE OF US WHO MARCHED TO REMIND TODAY'S GENERATION... THAT IF CHANGE IS GOING TO BE MADE FOR OUR PEOPLE, IT WILL REQUIRE THE TYPE OF SPIRIT, SACRFICE AND STRUGGLE THAT WAS PRESENT 32 YEARS AGO ON AUGUST 29, 1970, IN LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA!