

Rita Medina

Tape 85

SR 58,CR 122

19:30:08 Um, Miss Rita Medina let's start up with your earliest memories, you grew up in North Gila in Arizona. What was it like being a child there?

30:19 There were, I think we were very very happy as far as I can remember. Like Cesar and I were very very close you know, we used to call ourselves tito, tita, monito, monita cause everywhere you know we were real close. So to me I remember very very happy days, we were very..

30:37 And what was it like growing up in the country, in the farm?

30:41 We did a lot of chores, a lot of chores. We had to help my dad on the farm. Even though as young as we were we had to do a lot of chores. Cesar had a lot of chores, he took care of the horses, the cows, make sure that they had water, feed 'em.

30:59 So everybody, everybody had to pull their own weight?

31:00 Everybody, ahuh, everybody had something to do even though we were real, real young we still had to help out on the farm. Help my mom with the chickens and everything.

CUT

31:17 Now you were the oldest child so you were the first to go to school so you figured out what it was like and you, you got Cesar ready. Tell us about taking him for the first day to school.

31:25 Well, all that summer before school we'd play you know school I was the teacher of course and they were the students and I got Cesar ready and I told him, when you go to school and the teacher's gonna ask you what's your name little boy, your name Cesar Chavez how old are you I'm six and you know all those questions. He was ready and we went to school and uh, told the teacher this is my brother, Cesar he says oh hi Cesar and sit down and got all the information records when he was born and all this then he said we're ready he says ok your sitting with the first graders and with the seats, it was a little country school it only had three rooms. We had eight grades in three rooms. So the first uh, room where I was it was first, second and third so the teacher says ok Cesar let's sit here and you know your sister has to go to her seat. Oh no he says I'm sitting with my sister. The teacher says no I'm sorry you can't you know you have to sit with the first graders. He goes nope, I'm sitting with my sister and he got hold of me, he says I'm sitting with you, I says no you have to sit with the first graders. Nope, if I don't sit with you I'm going home and he took off the door and I ran after him. I says no you got to stay here, you can't go home. So they debated for awhile, finally the teacher says ok there's two of the second graders he says Kyle and Jack will you get us a desk and put it by Rita? So Cesar sat by me. I can't remember it was one or two days that he was there, maybe even three, then finally he agreed he had to go with the first graders but he won that first

battle right there and then. He was just, he was determined to go home and he wasn't gonna, if he didn't sit by me he wasn't gonna go home.

32:58 Well that sort of tells us what kind of person he was, what was he like as a young, young boy?

33:03 He was, he was the same, very determined, very determined...

33:05 I need a whole sentence so you have to say Cesar was...

33:07 Cesar was very determined. Whatever he, he always had plans, he always had like a goal. He always had a goal even when we were little that he would, he would tell us you feed those two horses and I'll feed this cow or you do this and I do that, he always had everybody assigned to do something you know and.....

CUT

33:35 Now when you were kids going to school and going to town occasionally how did, how did people treat you? Was, was there a lot of discrimination that you experienced?

33:44 That I can remember yes. Ahuh....

33:47 Tell me again I remember a lot of discrimination.

33:50 Uh, like to me when, when school like in school they, they punish me because I spoke Spanish all the time we were all cousins, everybody in

that school were cousins one way or the other, a few friends that were not related and we all spoke nothing but Spanish and you know the teacher would say you can't speak Spanish and I spoke Spanish all the time so I got punished for that and the, the I don't know what to say, the white children or what ever that you know understand English we used to speak in front of them and they'd go tell the teacher Rita's speaking Spanish again so they call me in the office and you're getting punished again for speaking Spanish but we all did anyway, even though we got punished we did. They you know a lot of things like uh, you know you uh, they would say um, you can't do this because you don't really understand what American people are. Or, meaning like, you Mexicans in other word you know. And so there were a lot things that they couldn't uh, they didn't let us do 'cause they thought we couldn't do it 'cause we were Mexicans in other words, that's what they used to call us. But then it came one time when I and my cousin Rudolph, he was the best basketball player, he was good, I mean he, like Winterdam school was the first in the whole Arizona because of him and then we used to tell him, I thought you said Mexicans couldn't do anything? We used to get back at them. But boy Rudolph, they would, they would take him all over. We used to call him Yofo for nickname...

35:18 Now when, when it comes to responding to that discrimination, um, I've heard that, that your father, let's talk about your parents a little. Your father was a very strong person who really wouldn't tolerate injustice or when things were wrong, tell me a little about your father.

35:33 Well my dad was um, how could I describe him? He's very respectful and he, he only said one word you know he wasn't the type of

person that would talk and get into arguments. One word, the, the same way with us. We knew when he meant business, one word. And uh, you know he just didn't let anybody run over him. He would defend himself because he, he knew, he knew a lot more than us.

36:01 And did he think it was important for you children to learn those values?

36:04 Yes he did. They did. They really and they really wanted us to go to school like when Cesar graduated from uh the eighth grade, the grammar school they wanted him to go to high school and he said no I'm not going to school 'cause I'm not letting my mother work in the fields anymore 'cause my dad and my mom and I had, the three of us had to work 'cause I never went to school after we came from Arizona. I never attended any schools in California till I was fifty. I went back to school to get my high school diploma and uh, he said no I am not letting my mother, you are staying home, he says I'm working but we want you to go to school, he says no I can learn later. He says now I'm gonna work and help the family. 'Cause he says my mother's not going to the fields anymore. He used to sit all day and just listen to the fields and how hard it was for us to go work, come home and do the chores at home and next day get up and go work in the fields 'cause they were in school. So he said no, no way I am not going to high school or college or nothing. He says I'm going to work and you're staying home. But they were, they were very against it, my mom and dad they wanted him to go, all of us to go to school. They believed in education a lot.

37:14 Now your mother was, was a very, very strong influence on you and Cesar, yes?

CUT

37:27 Now, tell me a little bit about, about how your mother affected you and Cesar. She was a very strong influence wasn't she?

37:35 Very strong. She had all this advice that she would give us all the time you know, how to be a better person, how not to get into violence, she didn't believe in violence and uh, she would always say you know if you, if somebody wants to fight with you and you go ahead and fight back that fighting will never end so you just, you have to be the one to stop it right then and there, don't continue the fight. Like they say you know turn your other cheek around. She always used to tell us that. And she always used to tell us you, you know be good to everybody and God will be good to you. And this is, don't fight with nobody, don't get into arguments, all these things because well of course when your little you know your liable to get into fights with other kids in school or whatever and she would always, she would always, she was very very friendly with everybody. My mother made friends like I don't know. She never knew anybody but she'd get up there on the street or where we're working and she friends right away. She was real friendly. Everybody got to uh, really liked her because she was real friendly.

38:38 Was that just her personality or did you.....

38:39 That was, I think that was her personality. She was just born that way.

38:44 Let's go back to talking about your father a little more. Um, he was a man of a lot of principles. Was, was, do you think Cesar really got interested in labor organizing because of, of your dad? Do you think that was an example?

38:57 Well probably and then also because that's what we did for a living, you know and that's where we learned how, how uh, awful it is on the fields and how they treat the farmworkers and how we were treated so he always used to say there's got to be something you know somebody has to do something for us, for workers in the fields. He says there's got to be, something's got to be done. He always used to say that. He said somebody has to do something. So he knew that somebody would, I guess and, unle..I don't know if then he knew he wanted to do something but it turned out to be that he was the one that did something for the farmworkers.

39:33 Tell me a little about um, what it felt like you growing up on the ranch, what it felt like when you had to become migrants and, and lose all that and, and travel and...

39:44 Oh it was really, it was awful. It was really bad. 'Cause we had never worked for, you know for anybody else. We never lived out of our home. Here we came to California and we, we were lucky we got a tent, most of the time we were living under a tree, with just a canvas on top of us and sometimes in the car. You know like you see a lot of nowadays. And so

it was really really, it was sad in a way for us. After living in our own farm for all these years and then we come to California and were so like they say green you know verdes we didn't know what to do. We'd go work and if we didn't, we weren't uh, wise to go get a basket we wouldn't work in all day because people would just move all us out of the way and they would get baskets and go work like picking peas and string beans. So there were days we didn't work 'cause we didn't get a basket. So one day Cesar said tomorrow I'm gonna be there the first one in the morning and I'm gonna get two baskets, not only one. So he did one day he left real early in the morning, like four in the morning, he was there when the baskets came, he got two baskets so we were you know that day we made money because we had two baskets and we could work all day. But he was the one that decided. He says tomorrow I'm going and I'm standing there when the truck comes in 'cause it was a big truck that would come in with baskets and then people would just grab baskets and go work. He says tomorrow I'm gonna be there the first one to get, I'm not only getting one but I'm getting two and he did.

CUT

CR 123

41:14 Uh, Rita let's go back for a minute because when we talked about being little children the sound wasn't working too well. Tell me, tell me about how, what you and Cesar used to call each other when you were kids and the kinds of games you would play.

41:26 We used to call each other tito and tita meaning monito and monita, you know little sister and little brother and we were always holding

hands and you know going everywhere together, everywhere we were together. We uh, played you know games and just like a brother and sister and I always, I was the oldest one and always ahead but he always came up with different ideas ahead of me. He wanted to get ahead of me like he always did you know and uh, but you know up to, we were close all the time. We were so close that we even got married the same day. He said we'd get married the same day and we'd celebrate our anniversary together all the time. And we did for a lot of years celebrate our bir..our anniversary together until he started going with the union a lot and uh, but he always used to call me on my anniversary, he always used to call us on our anniversary 'cause we were married the same day. I, when we were young you know we're like teenagers, seventeen, eighteen I always used to tell him when I get married you're gonna be my best man. He says you're gonna be my maid of honor and that's the way it was. He was my best man and I was his maid of honor. And he was in the Navy and I, I used to write to him. When he went to the Navy I wrote to him like eight hundred letters, one every day. I made a point of just putting at, whatever I mean just say hi how are you, we're fine. I put a letter in the mailbox every day since the day he left till the day he came back.

42:59 By that time you were the family was out here in...

43:02 In California, yeah. In Delano. We were living in Delano when he went into the Navy.

43:06 And life was a little better than wasn't it?

43:08 A little bit. But we still were farmworkers. Yeah but we were older and we knew more and we had more experience you know like we would teach in a way we would teach the, the other generations that were coming in our cousins that came in from Arizona you know we tell 'em what to do what to look for and everything. Not like us nobody told us anything we were really like we were abused in a way from other farmworkers 'cause we didn't know anything, we didn't know any better we never had worked for anybody else. So we were just you know we had to get wise on our own. He did he was the one that got everything you know got us up there because he wasn't afraid of anything or anybody so he'd just go out there and he did what he had to do.

43:52 You showed me a picture of you and Richard and Cesar. Probably you're teenagers or early young adults and it looks like a very happy time, you know.

44:02 Yeah. And uh, yeah we used to go to dances together and you know, parties and stuff. I couldn't go nowhere unless he took us that was the rule of my mom and my dad. Although I was the oldest, he was the oldest male of the family so he was like the boss in other words you know you take care of your sister. So if he didn't take me to a dance or a party I couldn't go 'cause my mom wasn't the person that would let us go with friends or alone, no way we had to go with our brothers. So we were always we, I used to say oh Cesar, I guess he had a date or something he didn't want to bother with me. I said I'll pay you take me to the dance he says oh no not today I can't go today. It was, we were always real close.

44:48 But when, when the kids were little you were the, you were the oldest. Not the oldest male but the oldest person so you had a lot of responsibility.

44:57 I had a lot of responsibility. I made sure that everything 'cause my mom had to help my dad in the farm so I was, I was supposed to have all the dinner ready, their clothes, make sure they get up to go to school in the morning, their hair was combed, everything like a second, they always call me my second mother. My, my baby brother he just says your my second mother so does Richard my brother Richard and my sister Vicki too. They always say, which I was. I was their second mother because my mom was always on the farms helping my dad. So I, I had this responsibility since I was very young about eight years old, I took over the responsibility.

45:33 Was that hard?

45:34 It was hard in a way. I enjoyed it because I love my brothers and my sister a lot but it was hard 'cause I was you know eight years old. You want to go out there and play you don't want to be making tortillas and cooking and washing and you know cleaning, ironing and all this, which I had to do because I was the oldest.

CUT

46:03 So, in the early '50's there was a big change in Cesar's life and everybody's life here in San Jose when CSO started and when you met Fred Ross and you were involved in that too. Talk about what happened and how you saw Cesar change then.

46:21 Well like, he didn't, he didn't really care for the way we'd been treated before for white people I should say and when he met Ross, Fred Ross he, took him a long time before Cesar could meet him because every time he'd come to the door he'd say tell him I'm not here, I don't want to talk to him or no send him away. Finally one day he just couldn't get away from him you know he just met him right there and then and they started talking and finally he said you know I think this man is pretty honest I think we're gonna work with him. He wants to do a lot of good for the community and not only the Mexican American people but you know the whole community in general. So we started working with him and first thing we did was a big voter registration drive. Big. I remember how many voters we registered that year. He had us working, Cesar was the head of the voter registration committee. Boy, ten, twelve hours and just going and going and going. We, we got a big voter registration. Then we had comm, committee I was in charge of the committee for citizenship and illegal papers. My husband was in charge of the membership committee and I also did the school committee, making sure people went to school to learn English and go. Three times a week we went to school you know with them and if they needed any help like doing their immigration papers or mostly citizenship. We'd take them to get their fingerprints, we filled, I filled out their applications. Then he made me a notary public. I says Cesar you gonna get me in jail, I probably go to prison. No, no you can do it come on let's go. So here we go I became a notary public. I just gave up my license about three years ago, I didn't want to renew them anymore.

47:59 So during that period did you see Cesar changing as he...tell me how he changed.

48:05 Um. Let's see I don't know how, how to describe the way he changed. It was like he, he cared a lot. I know he always did but this time I saw him care more 'cause he went on...

48:16 Can you start over again and say Cesar cared a lot?

48:18 Cesar cared a lot about uh, people but as soon as he got involved with the CSO I guess that he learned more and we found out more about what was going on in the community. More needs he, I think he got more and more interested in helping people and caring. He was very caring. Very caring and there was you know the first citizenship class that we did, it was the school now it's called Cesar Chavez school, so it was called the Mayfair school then. We had a big potluck with seventy senior citizens that became American citizens through the program of CSO. We had a big party that night, everything potluck and all. He was so excited. It made the newspaper and you know it was a lot of publicity 'cause he had, he had accomplished what he was looking for as far as the making people become American citizens and getting their pension. We worked a lot to be, to get the pension for non-citizens in uh, uh, California. 'Cause you know they didn't give pensions to the non-citizens in California. And so we worked and worked and...

49:24 When you saw what a, what an impact Cesar had on farm labor and common community did you look back to, to when he was a child and could you see that he had this talent and ability?

49:35 I think so. I did. I always, I've said it all the time since I remember all the things that you know like that first day he went to school that he was determined to stay there and a lot the things to me I think so.

49:51 The other thing is you know the, the, the process wasn't all was victories. There were setbacks and defeats. You were close family how did Cesar seem like when things went badly?

50:02 Well he didn't, you know disappointed said that he, he wouldn't give up. He always say well we gotta go on 'cause I know we can win or we can you know do good whatever wherever went wrong, we gotta do it good. We can't give up. He never gave up.

CUT

50:27 When you look back especially to the early years is there anything that really stands out some, some vivid memory? About taking him to school? What, what other things really really happened that seem important now when you look back?

50:43 Gee, I don't know. Everything was important. I can't remember what I really knew when I look back.

50:52 It's a lot of stuff.

50:53 There was, it's a lot and than it, there's like right now I can't remember, afterwards I'll remember everything.

51:00 Well let's talk about, about what people should, people who never knew him certainly never grew up with Cesar, knew him like you did what, what you want them to know about what, what's important for them to understand about your brother.

51:15 Well I think that he um....

51:18 Could you start off saying my brother....

51:19 My brother was a very um, caring person you know in one way. Very humble but you know. And very determined and he always had a goal. Whatever he wanted to accomplish he never stopped until he accomplished it. And uh, you know that's I guess is where he got as far as he went. There was, I know there was a lot of unfinished things that he left. And maybe, probably the ones that are taking over can finish doing his dreams. He had a lot...

51:53 Do you think his goals can be achieved? Will people carry that on?

51:56 I think so. I think they will. They're, they're trying. We're all trying to do and make his dreams come true. But there was a lot of things that he had planned 'cause he always talked to me about his plans and what

the union was gonna do and all this. There was a lot of things that were not done when he left. But I think they're going to be done, I'm pretty sure.

52:20 But it'll be different.

52:21 It'll be different. It's even different for me that I know and I even know all those people that are working you know for him. But it's still different. There's something missing and it's him.

Ok, let's stop there.

END