

El Movimiento en Las Vegas, Nuevo Mexico: **Defiance was its most important product!**

by Yoly Zentella

My friend, David, waved his hand across the room, “see all of this?” He was referring to the packed art department exhibit space at Highlands University. The high school Mariachi Cardenal was playing as Chicano faces—joyous parents, friends and comunidad—watched and listened in admiration and pride. The periphery of the exhibit space was occupied by elaborately decorated altares and ofrendas to those who walked before us: Las Gorras Blancas 19th century activists against colonization of El Norte and Che among others. We were celebrating the opening of El Día de los Muertos, Day of the Dead, a yearly event when the community remembers their ancestors or memorialize a crucial event. David continued, “this would have never been possible here at Highlands had it not been for the Movimiento.”

In the late ‘60s David, a Movimiento veterano, witnessed first-hand the Anglo-centric dominance at Highlands—the lack of Chicano professors and administrators, the watered down, biased, courses that Chicano college students were required to take, and the air of Anglo superiority that permeated the campus. Similar conditions existed in the Las Vegas public high schools. But, as the spirit of liberation spread across U.S. high schools and colleges in the late ‘60s, such historically abusive circumstances, overlapping with other consequences of 19th century colonization of the Southwest, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo of 1848, in particular, were about to change.

El Movimiento, taking place in Las Vegas, 1968-1974, was instrumental in creating change. High school and college student activists and organizers marched and picketed. They took over the administration building at



Photo: Adelita Medina, circa 1972-1973

Highlands demanding Chicano faculty and administrators, and Chicano studies at both educational levels. Through political education and awareness, students’ understanding of colonization and racism was evident when the organization’s name changed from Spanish American Student Organization to Chicano Associated Student Organization.

El Partido Raza Unida was born out of activism at the time with Chicano candidates running for city government posts and organizing around issues that impacted la gente.

El Movimiento actively supported the struggle by La Alianza de las Mercedes, spearheaded by Reies López Tijerina in Tierra Amarilla. The goal was to regain the land grant stolen from ancestors of area residents

and incorporated into Forest Service jurisdiction. El Movimiento and La Alianza were one struggle because a true end of oppression in El Norte was and still is in the return of stolen lands, the return to a sustainable rural way of life, and a return to the dignity, pride, and empowerment that living within one’s culture gives.

The Forest Service did not return any lands to La Alainza and their activists were dispersed, arrested, and hunted down by the FBI. The Movimiento waned around 1974. Yet the ramifications of activism could be seen on that opening night of Día de los Muertos in 2016. The use of Spanish, at one time prohibited in the schools, pride in our música, the honoring of our ancestors, and maintaining El Norte traditions openly in New Mexico would never have been tolerated by Highlands or even dared to be expressed by the community. Now—we are not afraid of who we are, and we dare those that would attempt to silence us to just try...

—Orale David!



Photo:
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