Q: Sal, as a Chicano American who himself grew up in East L.A., can you describe what education was like for Chicano and Chicana students before the blowouts?
A: Public education in East L.A. before the walkouts reflected the legacy of the so-called "Mexican Schools" in the Southwest and southern California going back to the early 20th century when mass immigration from Mexico began. As immigrants found work in urban and rural areas, public schools sprang up that were called Mexican Schools. These were segregated schools for Mexicans with limited and inferior education. Despite many years of effort by Mexican Americans to change these schools, including legal struggles, the basic nature of these schools continued into the 1960s. These schools were characterized by high dropout rates, a heavily vocational curriculum and a marginalized academic one, low reading scores, few academic counselors, overcrowded conditions, and worst of all, low expectations of the Chicano students by a mostly Anglo or white faculty. Moreover, these schools in no way reflected the ethnic and cultural background of the kids. These were the conditions we faced in 1968 when the students decided to take things into their own hands and attempt to force changes by resorting to a student strike.

Q: Were these problems typical of Chicano education throughout the Southwest, or were they particularly pronounced in Los Angeles?
A: Sal: These problems were not just in the public schools in L.A. but throughout the Southwest where the majority of Mexican Americans lived at that time. In some areas, it was even worse.

Q: Mario, what were the L.A. blowouts, and when did they occur? Besides the systemic problems Sal has described, was there an immediate cause for them?
A: The L.A. blowouts, or walkouts, occurred in early March 1968 and involved thousands of Mexican American students in the East L.A. high schools and middle schools who engaged in student strikes for a week by walking out of their classes to protest the inferior conditions in their schools. The immediate cause of the blowouts was that students at Wilson High School in East L.A. had a school play, "Barefoot in the Park," cancelled because the principal, after going to the last rehearsal, decided that the play contained sexual innuendos. The students in the play protested and spontaneously...
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staged a walkout of their school and were joined by many others. The blowouts had commenced even though Sal Castro and the student leaders had not planned for the strike at that time. But after Wilson students went out, Sal and the leaders had no choice but to engage in a total walkout.

Q: How did these walkouts come by the name of "blowouts"?
A: Mario: John Ortiz, one of the walkout leaders at Garfield High School, coined the term "blowout." A jazz fan, Ortiz borrowed this from a jazz term that refers to stressing a particular note or giving your music a particular and forceful emphasis. He then transferred the term to the energy of the walkouts.

Q: Mario, how did you and Sal meet? Do you have a shared history or common experiences that led you to write the story of the East L.A. blowouts?
A: Sal Castro and I met in the late 1990s, when I invited him to come speak to my class at U.C. Santa Barbara on the History of the Chicano Movement. I knew Sal was one of the few Mexican American teachers in the East L.A. public schools and that he was the key teacher who motivated the students to think of taking a dramatic action that led to the blowouts. My interest in working on Sal's story is connected to my interest in the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Although both of us come from different communities (I am from El Paso, Texas), we share a commitment to social and educational justice. In my own work in Chicano history, I have focused in large part on the role of leadership, and Sal Castro is clearly the epitome of leadership.

Q: Mario, you modeled your book on the Latin American tradition of the testimonio. What is this tradition and what are its roots? Why is it well suited to the story you are telling and how did you adapt it to best suit this project?
A: The testimonio is a narrative tradition from Latin America that began in the 1960s. It is an oral history of a key political activist or even revolutionary initiated and organized by either a journalist or an academic. The intent is to use the oral history or testimonio as a teaching and consciousness-raising device to promote issues of social justice. The testimonio is suitable for my book on Sal Castro in that its tradition links a political activist, in this case a committed teacher struggling for educational justice, with an equally committed academic who wants to convey Sal's story to a larger audience that will be inspired by it and the story of the blowouts. The hope is that this audience will commit themselves to the struggle for educational justice for students who lack mainstream educational opportunities and mobility and for social justice in an America that has not fully achieved its democratic ideals.

Q: Sal, what were the early influences on your life that led to your later activism?
A: The early influences were not only my bad experiences in the public schools, but also in the Catholic schools that I attended. How early elementary teachers seemed to convey prejudicial attitudes toward me and how even in my Catholic high school, there was a tracking system where most Mexican American students were assigned the least
challenging academic curriculum. I was also influenced by the discrimination and racism against Mexican Americans in the community, including that against my own father, who was deported in the mid-1930s as part of a larger deportation campaign to round-up and send close to half a million Mexicans back to Mexico, including U.S. born children, under the unfair justification that "illegal aliens" were taking jobs away from "real Americans," as well as spreading diseases and crime.

Then, in 1943, as a young boy shining shoes in downtown L.A., I witnessed the Zoot-Suit Riots in which U.S. Navy personnel ran rampant, attacking Chicanos dressed in the popular zoot-suit of the day. These riots reflected Chicano-military tensions in the area, such as those over girls.

After high school, when I was drafted into the Army, I witnessed the Jim Crow system in the South where I was stationed for a while. Later in Dallas, in a layover at the airport, I was refused service at a restaurant because I was Mexican American, even though I was wearing my U.S. Army uniform. After I returned and went to college, I heard professors in my classes at L.A. State express gross stereotypes about Mexican Americans and why they failed in school.

My own early experiences as a teacher in the early 1960s at Belmont High School exposed me to the full problems of the Mexican Schools, with their high dropout rates and non-academic tracks for most Mexican Americans, as well as other problems. All of this motivated me to become a committed teacher who would not just complain about these conditions but attempt to change them by my actions.

Q: Sal, what did you see as key to improving the educational experience and lives of Chicano and Chicana Americans?

A: I think that the first thing that had to change was the perception Mexican American students had of themselves. They had to begin to feel good and secure about themselves. They had to possess a positive image of themselves, their parents, and their communities. What also had to change was the curriculum. It needed to integrate Mexican and Chicano history and culture and show the positive contributions of people of Mexican descent to the United States. For example, showing how Mexican Americans have patriotically supported and participated in America's wars going all the way back to the American Revolution, the Civil War, World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and today in Iraq and Afghanistan. Once they feel good about themselves, Chicano/Latino kids can then go on to a full academic curriculum where they are encouraged to go to college and to become professionals who also give back to their communities.

Q: Mario, you describe the blowouts as part of the general civil rights movement and Vietnam-era protests that were sweeping the nation. What was unique or different about the blowouts?

A: What was unique about the blowouts was that this historical event represented the beginnings of the urban Chicano Movement as opposed to that of the rural movement led by César Chávez and the farm workers. The urban Chicano Movement would become, not only in L.A. but throughout the Southwest, the central battleground of the Chicano
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Movement for both civil rights and community empowerment and a new, more empowering identity. Further, the blowouts and the Chicano Movement represented the oppositional struggles by Chicanos in a period of political engagement—the '60s—that most historians have only viewed from white and black perspectives, excluding the major role of Chicanos in the protests of this era.

I would further add that the specific uniqueness of the blowouts was the role of high school students in these protests. Most attention to the student protests of the 1960s has been focused on college students and not on high school students. The blowouts highlight that high school students were also politically engaged. The L.A. blowouts would influence other Chicano high school walkouts in other parts of the Southwest.

Q: Sal, what problems did the blowouts begin to address, and what problems remain to be solved 43 years later? What is needed now to improve education and the prospects for Chicano and Chicana Americans?

A: The blowouts began to address the very nature of the Mexican Schools or inner city schools that, instead of creating opportunities for educational and economic mobility, reinforced a status quo which valued people of Chicano/Latino descent primarily for being cheap labor. The blowouts brought attention to the fact that although education can be a panacea for social ills, education in schools like the Mexican Schools can also be the problem. More specifically, the blowouts brought attention to the high dropout rates in these schools and the many other problems we have mentioned. Many of these problems remain, including a lack of curriculum for Chicano/Latino kids to reinforce their particular ethnic backgrounds.

We have made some progress: more of our kids are attending college, there are more Latino teachers and administrators and a stronger academic curriculum, etc., but with a still growing Latino immigrant population and a new generation of kids going to these schools, many of the earlier problems continue in one way or another. In addition, schools in the inner city are caught in battles over school budgets, and they usually lose out, remaining underfunded and under-supported in other resources.

What is needed is a renewed struggle by our communities and our students to force new changes to improve the schools. One of the lessons of the blowouts was that only student and community pressure brings attention to the problems and results in change. Nothing of substance ever trickles from above; it starts from below. Am I advocating new blowouts? Well why not? Only dramatic action seems to be listened to in our society. Go for it. Blowout!

Q: Mario and Sal, why are the blowouts important today?

A: Mario: The blowouts represent a major event of the Chicano Movement and one of the most significant examples of high school student protest in United States history. The blowouts stress that the struggle for educational justice is critical to American democracy then and now.

Sal: The blowouts are important because of the courage of the kids and what it says about [more]
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those who have struggled to make life better for others. The students knew that whatever changes they could bring about in the schools would not affect them but they hoped it would affect those who came behind them. They struggled for other Chicanos that they didn’t even know. What this means to me is that courage and dedication is central to bringing about change, and this is what the blowouts and the Chicano Movement represented and perhaps this is still an example for today’s students and others.

# # #

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