

My SACNAS Story  
Delivered at the 2018 SACNAS meeting

My parents came from Mexico. I was born and raised in Los Angeles, not in the Latino part of town, but in a poor white part of Los Angeles. At times I would hear “Mexican go back where you came from”, and I would think -but I am from here, I am not Mexican, my mother and father are Mexican. My mother said that I would understand better when we visited Mexico. So we did when I was around 13 and there I was told “Gringo go back where you came from”. An identity crisis developed, I seemed to not fit as Mexican or as American.

The year 1968 was an amazingly impactful year in the United States. Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated, it was the height of the Vietnam war protests leading to the mother’s march on Washington, a very successful year for Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, I received the PhD degree in mathematics from UCLA in 1968. Moreover, in 1968 the Chicano movement in Los Angeles and at UCLA was alive and strong. It was then that I found my identity, I became a proud Chicano, it was a perfect fit. “Viva la raza”- your response should be – “que vive”. The song that played as I walked on stage was Land of a Thousand Dances by one of the original Chicano rock bands Cannibal and the Headhunters. Many consider this song to be The Chicano National Anthem. An important part of the Chicano movement is depicted in the movie Walkout, reliving the 1968 walkout of the students at the five East Los Angeles high schools. It is a part of our proud Chicano history, and I recommend it to you.

In 1972 facilitated by Ciriaco Gonzalez a group of 17 of us got together to discuss the formation of an organization that would eventually be called SACNAS. We were mostly brown with shades of red, all male because that was the way that science representation was at that time. From the beginning SACNAS was multidisciplinary as it was founded by this small number of STEM faculty as a way to come together and support each other, regardless of discipline, through the tenure process. We were 3 chemists, 2 biochemists, 3 biologists, 3 physicists, and 2 mathematicians and 4 in other STEM areas. We very desperately needed the support of each other, for only we, certainly not our university colleagues, understood the challenge of dealing with the extra baggage that we as underrepresented minorities growing up in this country faced in our professional life.

So Chicano gave me an identity, and SACNAS gave me a Chicano family that greatly enhanced that identity. The guiding theme of SACNAS has always been to put the cause above the individual.

Our first meeting was in Atlantic City, New Jersey in 1973. The attendance was 50 or so mostly young brown and red professionals. I recall that of all the academic representation only two had tenure. You see in the early days universities often employed a “hire to fire” approach. They would hire underrepresented minorities on a yearly contract and then not renew the contract after a year or so. We bonded and we tried to guide and help each other. This bond has lasted me my entire life. JV Martinez and our families have been close over all the years. Indeed JV played a major role in my nomination for the National Medal of Science. We members of SACNAS were friendly and we were fun. At the Atlantic City meeting I remember a bunch of us walking the boardwalk. The big friendly Hector Cuellar would ask each woman that he encountered along the boardwalk “have you ever been hugged by a Mexican”, they would invariably answer “no” and Hector would hug them and say now you have been hugged by a Mexican. It doesn’t get any better than that.

In the early days of SACNAS we were only professionals, then we brought graduate student to our meetings. This was wonderful, my students and I lived for the SACNAS meetings. Yes, we had a dream that someday we would bring in undergraduates, and SACNAS has. But this brought in a new flavor, the old flavor disappeared, while the new flavor is different it is good.

Thank you

Richard Tapia