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Adult Education Students Succeed

Interviews by Cuba Z. Miller

Jaime Mercado

Additional Interviews

Rudolph Kastelic

Burke Mills

California Department of Education
Adult Education Oral History Project

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RUDOLPH KASTELIC

BURKE MILLS

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Burke Mills, Oral History Interview, Conducted 2003 by Cuba Z. Miller in San Diego, California, in *Adult Education Students Succeed: Jaime Mercado, et. aI.* (Sacramento: California Adult Education Oral History Project, 2005).

PREFACE

Adult education in California has a proud history of helping its citizens to meet the challenges of life in a huge, complex, multicultural state. Through the years, California adult educators have provided leadership to the nation in the development of innovative instructional practices and creative educational solutions.

The California Adult Education Oral History Project began in 1992 as a companion to a print history of adult education commissioned by the California Department of Education. The oral history project started with a small group of leaders whose careers began in the 1950's and 1960's and who witnessed and influenced important events in the development of the nation's largest adult education program.

To date, thirty-two educators whose careers span seventy years have participated. They represent the varying professional roles, organizations, and geography that comprise our state's diverse adult education programs. Some of the educators were adult learners who reached their life goals as a result of participation in the system.

These stories tell how California adult education met the needs of citizens in the wartime 1940's, and those of veterans and an exploding population in the 1950's. The growth and energy of California adult education in the nineteen-sixties, the institutionalization of competency based education in response to the influx of refugees and immigrants in the seventies and eighties, and the innovative uses of technology of the nineties have been recorded.

Significant assistance to the project was provided by the staffs both of the California State Archives and of the Oral History Program, History Department, California State University, Fullerton. This project could not have begun without the vision of Raymond G. Eberhard, Administrator, Adult Education Policy and Planning Unit, California Department of Education, and the support of the late Lynda T. Smith, Consultant, Adult Education Policy and Planning Unit.

Linda L. West
March, 2005

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Interviewer

Cuba Z. Miller

Interview Times and Places

Jaime Mercado: one interview was conducted in San Diego, California on September 23,2003.

Rudolph Kastelic: one interview was conducted in San Diego, California on September 24, 2003.

Burke Mills: one interview was conducted in San Diego, California on September 23, 2003.

Editing

The interviewees reviewed and edited the transcript. When the tape was inaudible or when necessary for clarification, some information was added and is indicated by brackets [ ].

Tapes

The original cassette tapes were transferred to reel to reel format at California State University, Fullerton and deposited with the California State Archives.

California Department of Education
Adult Education Oral History Project

Adult Education Students Succeed

Jaime Mercado

Sweetwater Union High School District
Division of Adult and Continuing Education

Principal, National City Adult School, 2002-2004

Graduate, Mar Vista Adult School, 1963

Sweetwater Union High School District 1973-2004

Other District Assignments

Principal
Assistant Principal
Resource Teacher
ESEA Program Specialist
Instructor

September 23, 2003
San Diego, California

By Cuba Z. Miller

PROJECT: Adult Education Students Succeed
California Adult Education Oral History Project

INTERVIEWEE: Jaime Mercado

INTERVIEWER: Cuba Miller

DATE: September 23, 2003

CM: This is Cuba Miller interviewing Jaime Mercado in San Diego, California, on September 23, 2003. Jaime is currently principal of National City Adult School in the Sweetwater Union High School District. The interview is a part of the Adult Education Students Succeed Initiative. The purpose of the interview is to highlight the impact adult education had on Mr. Mercado's education and his career.

It would be hard to find a better example of an adult education student succeeding than your own experience of going from an adult school graduate to an adult school principal, but to fully appreciate that journey, we need to start at the beginning. Why don't you fill us in on your childhood background and your early school experiences?

JM: Okay. I was born in Guadalajara, Mexico. My mother is from that area, but my dad and his family are from Arizona. As you know, things become very mobile with immigration.

CM: Across the border, yes. (laughs)

JM: Across the border. So my dad, early on, was left with the responsibility of taking care of his mother and his two sisters. At about thirteen, fourteen years old, he was

working, and they moved around to Colorado [and] to various parts of the United States working all kinds of occupations. My dad got used to that kind of mobility, sort of like a navy person that goes around, so he believed that his family should stay put someplace, and that's where we stayed for a long time.

My mother always wanted us to be here, and for the very obvious reasons that many people come to this country, and that is for social opportunities as well as financial opportunities. She felt that as long as her children had the opportunities, and her children had the desire to work, that they would never be poor such as we were in Mexico. And, you know, many people come for that kind of [opportunity]. My dad, being a laborer, didn't want us to come to be laborers. He felt that he could keep us over there and we'd get an education. My mother just felt differently.

So, eventually, we moved to the United States [in] 1955. I was eleven years old. We moved to San Ysidro. That's where I began to go to school.

CM: Did you speak any English when you came?

JM: Oh, no, no. No, no. No English at all. It was a different environment at the time because everybody spoke English. Even if they spoke any Spanish, they spoke English. It was an interesting adjustment for anybody coming to this country. Now it's different. You go anywhere and everybody speaks your language, so there is no urgent need to learn English because most people's needs can be met. But at the time, it wasn't. And I'm glad because we learned English very fast, very fast. There were no ESL (English as a Second Language) programs and all those kinds of things.

CM: Did you learn it at school or did you pick it up in the neighborhood?

JM: In the neighborhood was far faster, because there was no coordinated approach to teach a language. You sat in a classroom, and the teacher just talked. So by some miracle –

CM: Osmosis. (laughs)

JM: Yes, by osmosis you're supposed to pick up the language. Whereas, now there is a concentrated effort to say you are going to learn English, and this is how we're going to do it. I remember sitting in the class, and the teacher would read to us. I had no idea what was going on. But I learned it outside with the kids, watching TV, listening to the popular culture, the radio, all of those things. One of the things about learning English when you're a kid is that if anything is embarrassing, you remember it for about five seconds, if it's your peers, and then you move on. Other things you remember for the rest of your life.

One of the first phrases that just intrigued me because it sounded so melodious, and I wanted to know what it was, because the teacher would always say this–our fourth grade teacher, who, by the way, still is alive. She must be pretty near a hundred years old. Her name is Mrs. Smith. She would say, "I beg your pardon." I had no idea what it was, but it sounded so melodic. I asked my friend Arthur, "What does this mean?" He couldn't stop laughing. I imagine how it sounded. He would take me by the hand to other friends, [and] he'd say, "Say it again." Then they'd get a big kick out of it. I went back home, and my mother said, "Don't worry about it. Let them. You'll learn English. You learn it as fast as you can. You'll learn English. Keep trying." I had little experiences like that.

Among one of them, which is also kind of a funny thing, there were a bunch of us kids there in the fourth grade, and there was a kid – you know, nicknames. There was a kid they called "Dopey." Your aural discrimination is sometimes not there. I was in class, and the teacher was reading out of the textbook and it was all about the missions. She would say the name, which seemed to me "Dopey." I'd look, and Dopey was paying no attention to what was going on, he wouldn't acknowledge her. I thought, "Boy, kids in this country are rude." Because in Mexico, at the time, if an adult came in, you all stood up. I thought, "These are rude. She keeps calling his name Dopey, and he doesn't answer." Later, much later, I realized that what she was saying is that when the missions were being built, they were being built out of adobe. (both laugh) So I realized what the situation was.

One of the things about that kind of environment is that by the sixth grade we were then beginning to read more. Comic books played a big role, by the way. It was good that that was that kind of environment because we learned, and we learned far more and faster from our peer group than we did in school.

I remember another thing. You reflect on the times. This teacher had no training. I mean, nobody had an inkling. The teacher didn't know what to do with about six of us who spoke no English at all. She would tell us to copy page 95 to 105. [At first] I was very diligent, every word, every [sentence]. Then I skipped a sentence. She didn't say anything. Then I skipped two sentences. She didn't say anything. Then I skipped a paragraph. Then I skipped a page. Then I realized she wasn't reading them at all. (laughs) It was her way of dealing with what she had, a bunch of kids there that couldn't speak English, had no idea what was going on. She

had no training to do bilingual education or to do second language acquisition, none of that stuff.

CM: Have you told any of these stories to your ESL teachers?

JM: Yes.

CM: Because I imagine they'd get a kick out of it. (laughs)

JM: Yes. So it's sort of fun. Then I moved on to Southwest Junior High School and Mar Vista High School, and we moved on from there.

CM: Okay. Now, your dad was from Arizona. Was he born in Arizona? Was he a citizen?

JM: Yes, he was born in Arizona. One of the things – when I started getting my citizenship, I was at a stage in my life – I was about nineteen years. You have to be over eighteen to get your citizenship. I thought, I want to do it my way. The man said, "You have it through your dad." As a matter of fact, my brother and my sister got it through my dad. I said, "I want to do it my way."

So I went out and went through the process of what you go through, the examination and everything else. I got that through the naturalization process, and I'm sure that if I wanted to go back – my dad's still alive, by the way, he's ninety-eight years old – and I could get that through.

CM: How many siblings do you have, and where do you come? Are you the oldest?

JM: Originally, there were eight of us. Four of them have passed away, so there are four of us left. I am third from last.

CM: You mentioned that you went on to junior high and eventually to Mar Vista High School. You left school before you finished. Tell us about leaving school, when it was, and why you did it.

JM: We just started the eleventh grade, and it was the first week or so. Jobs became scarce, and my dad was getting older. Sometimes companies release you because they don't want you around when you're older so that they don't have to pay your retirement. I didn't understand that at the time. He was a laborer, hard-working man. He said, "You've got to get out and help." And I did.

At the time, I remember that – and I was a good student. I'll tell you a little story about that in a minute. Kids do things all in groups. I remember that if we went to look for a job, four or five of us had to go look for a job to give us enough courage to go out there and ask for the job. When I got out [of school], unfortunately, about three or four or five of us [talked], and we all left. Out of the five of us, or whatever number it was, I was the only one that went back and finished high school.

CM: Okay. How long was it, then, before you went back to the adult school?

JM: I started getting the jobs that only a high school dropout can get. I was picking tomatoes at that time. South Bay was not as populated as it is now, so there were tomato fields, a lot of tomato fields, celery, all kinds of other things. We picked that for a while and I thought, "This is hard work. I don't think I want to do this."

CM: That was when they still had the short-handled hoes, too, probably.

JM: Yes. Then, if it rained, you were stuck knee-deep and then had to carry the tomato boxes out of the rows after you filled them. You were in mud all the way up [to your ankles]. This was hard. So I got out of that one. Then I would get other jobs. I think

it was about a couple of months, and I decided I was going to go back to [adult] school. At the time, all the adult schools were on the high school campuses, and it was evening school.

CM: So that's how you knew about it.

JM: Exactly.

CM: Because it was just there.

JM: Yes. So I went back. By this time, I had had different kinds of jobs: washing dishes, making sandwiches, and working with a catering outfit.

CM: But you originally went back fairly quickly.

JM: Yes, within a couple of months. It was no more than that. There is something that we [internalize as] students in high school. Generally, not always. And that is that someone is responsible for you. That's actualized on the basis that if you're a teacher and I'm your student, and I'm failing, and [you] never send word to [my] parents, you're irresponsible. The parent comes over and says to you, "Why didn't you ever call me?" Or if you're absent and the school doesn't notify the parents, [they blame the school]. We internalize that someone is going to be responsible for us to make us do something, by either getting your parents after you or getting after you [themselves].

I was no different. Even though I was older, I was no different. I went to adult school, and I was tired [because I worked]. So I'd go over there, and I would open my first page to algebra, and I'd go to sleep. I did this for about two weeks or three weeks. I can't remember. It was long [ago]. It was three nights a week, and I had Mr. Sevier for algebra. He finally came along one day and said, "Jaime, you've

been sleeping for three weeks." I got a little huffy. He was going to get all over my case. Because that's what teachers are supposed to do. He's responsible for me, they're supposed to –

He said, "No, no. Don't worry. You're in adult school now; you are an adult." He said, "I'm going to tell you something. You can stay here and sleep as much as you want provided three things don't happen. If I need your desk because somebody else needs it, I'm going to ask you to leave. If you snore and disturb the class, I'm going to ask you to leave. And if you're slobbering all over yourself while you're sleeping and you make us sick about it, I'm going to ask you to leave." He said, "Other than that, you can stay here all you like. But I will tell you, nobody's going to do the work for you. You have to do it yourself. Page one has been page one for three weeks, and it can be page one for the rest of your life. And you can be a tenth grader for the rest of your life 'til you're ninety years old." He said, "The only question I have is, wouldn't you rather sleep more comfortably in your bed than here?"

Well, typical response of a student, I got a little huffy: "Well, don't talk to me like that." But people tell you the truth. In 7-12, we have to skirt the issue just a little bit at times because the parents [think] you're responsible for [the students].

All of these things add up. People always tell you things. Throughout school people tell you, you can do very well, and you ought to do something because you're smart. I know that people believe that they go in one ear and out the other, but I choose to believe that those are seeds that are planted in the back of your mind to germinate at the right time. They're just there.

I had been bouncing around all over the place. I had been working at a car wash, [and] I was not feeling good about myself. I was getting $35 a week after working six and a half days a week. Minimum wage was $1.05. The guy use to pay us 95 cents an hour. I was feeling kind of bad about the job, you know. One day I decided to turn the guy in. I called the Labor Commission and turned him in for underpaying us. The next day he calls me in, and he says, "Jaime, you called the Labor Commission and complained." "I didn't do that." (both laugh) He says to me, "Look." He takes me outside and says, "See all these guys? All come from Mexico. None of them speak any English. You're the only one that speaks English. You're the one that turned me in." Oh, man.

Anyway, he wouldn't give me a job for about a week or so. All he did was – you came in, fifty people got in there, and he'd say – you drive off, you do bodies, you do this. And if he didn't tell you anything, that meant you didn't work that day. I tried to go collect unemployment, and [the owner] said, "Oh, actually, I didn't lay him off. I was looking for him today." So finally I got the picture.

These other guys would always tell me, "Jimmy –" They called me Jimmy. "You're stupid. You're legally here. You speak English. You almost got a high school diploma. What are you doing here with us? We will work for 50 cents an hour because in Mexico it's $8 a week." All of those things that people told me along the line began to come back a little bit to me.

CM: Even what your friends said to you.

JM: Even what your friends said. The last straw was this. I had drive-off, which means you get into the car [and drive it off the rack]. Okay. I had drive-off. They used to

give us these white overalls that were twenty times too big for you, all rolled up and all dirty. This was on a Wednesday. In American high schools, there's always the Mr. Athletic, the one that all the girls are in love with, and, of course, there's always the girl that everybody's in love with.

CM: Cheer leader.

JM: Some beautiful girl. All of us think we're all up there, too, somewhere along the line. I wasn't any different. I was working that one day, and the girl that was the most popular girl, that we all had a crush on – and I was not an exception to it. She and I were friends, that was about it. I was working there one day, and it was about eleven o'clock. This nice expensive-looking car comes out. I drive it off, clean it all inside, honk the horn, have the key [ready]. And there is that girl. She was dressed like she was going to a job interview. She was dressed. And there I was. I was embarrassed, and she was embarrassed for me. She didn't know what to do, so she reached into her purse and gave me a quarter tip. Here I thought I was a stud in high school, and I felt about this big. (gesturing very small) I thought, I deserve this, I deserve this. Everything came rushing back to me, [all the advice], and I thought, I got to get out of here.

I went over and took those things off, and I told the owner of the car wash, "Jack, I'm leaving." He said, "You can't. I don't have anybody else to take your place. It's eleven o'clock. The rush hour comes in at twelve." I said, "I'm leaving." He said, "If you leave, I won't pay you the day." I said, "I have to go. I'm leaving." "If you leave, I won't pay you the week." I said, "I'm leaving anyway. You keep the money." He said, "Why do you have to leave now? All you've got is another three

hours left." I said, "Because if I don't leave now and I accept this, it'll be much easier tomorrow to accept this for the rest of my life. I have to leave now." So I went back to adult school.

CM: You actually had stopped after Mr. Sevier had told you that.

JM: Yes. I stopped for about three weeks, maybe four. I went back to adult school. Things clicked. You're an adult. You're responsible for yourself. All these things that people have told you [come back]. So I went back to adult school, and they put me in Mr. [Burke] Mills' class. I went there, and I'll tell you that my future looked bleak. I couldn't see past my nose it looked so dark, and I was extremely depressed about what I was going to do with the rest of my life.

Anyway, I started with Mr. Mills, and I was determined that I had to do something. Fortunately, Mr. Mills has this gift to bring out something from within you that will carry you through the rest of your life in succeeding. I started with him. He would guide me and give me advice and things like that. He said, "If you want to, you can take [all] the courses with me. I'll talk to [the other teachers], and they can give you the books." So I did.

To make a long story short, I finished the eleventh and twelfth grade in six months. It was done. That's when things began to focus for me. I thought, "That's what I want to do. I want to go into education, and I want to have the same effect on students, on people like *me*, as Mr. Mills had on me."

CM: And you recognized it at the time, that he was –

JM: Oh, Yes. And that's when I decided I wanted to go into teaching. Having been raised in San Ysidro, there were extremely few who even finished high school, let alone go

to college. I thought, "That's what I want to do." That was my objective. I not only came out of Mr. Mills' class with a high school diploma, I came out with the drive and a mission to do something. That's far more important, because a piece of paper's a piece of paper. But if you come out of some relationship that you have, or out of an institution with a direction and a motivation to follow that through, that's the most important and valuable thing. I'm sure you've talked to Mr. Mills. He had people that he affected in that way.

It is unfortunate that we, in this day and age, are not recognizing that characteristic that is so valuable. We try to mechanize education by saying this must be done at this time, and that must be done at that time, and somebody will go check to see if you're on page 95 and 96 and you've covered the objectives. That's important, but not as important as making a connection with that student and lighting that fire from within that student so that student can go forward.

CM: The best teachers have that internal gift.

JM: That's right.

CM: And that's what it is. It's a gift to make that connection.

JM: That was my experience in adult school. Then I moved on and went on to college.

CM: Okay.

JM: Oh, I was going to tell you something. I was not particularly the Boy Scout type.

CM: Oh, really! (laughs)

JM: I was a fairly good student, but you saw me and you thought, "Oh, I don't think I want to be in an alley somewhere with this guy." I wasn't a cholo, but I was not a Boy Scout, [either]. I went to one of my first classes [in a high school], science, [with] a

teacher by the name of Ted Testa. Mr. Testa had just come out of the army. I mean, he was "army."

CM: A sergeant in the army.

JM: I don't know what he was, but he was the army. We sat down in class, and he says, "I want to tell you that I'm in charge of this class, and I don't want to see any of you in the back – you especially in the back – sitting back there, I don't want to see any Lucky Strikes through your shirt, I don't want to see you hanging from the lights, I don't want to see you –" He's going on and on about "you in the back." I thought, "Boy, somebody in the back's in deep stuff here." I looked around. I was the one in the back. (both laugh) I was already older. I was about eighteen years old in the tenth grade. I never failed any grades, but when you come from another country – and I thought, you know, it's okay.

CM: Yes. That's the way it's going to be.

JM: Uh-huh. One of the things that happened with him – I studied really hard. He had tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders in his class. Unfortunately, there are some teachers who give you trial by fire. That means give you killer tests and weed out the men from the boys, the women [from the girls]. Which should never be, because it doesn't encourage kids – but he did that.

CM: And you surprised him.

JM: Yes. It was like a hundred and eighty questions. I guess it was more to show [what kind of a teacher he was]. I don't know. But, you know, the philosophy – he was a nice man, but . . . . I got the highest score in all of his classes, and the one that came closest to me was like forty or fifty points behind me, and it was a twelfth grader. So

he had a second look. He made a mistake. He tried to do something good, but he – he said, "Ah." And he looked at it. I couldn't have possibly cheated because I was sitting in the back by myself. He really warmed up to me. Then he brought me up, wanted me to sit in the front right next to his desk facing the class, making me a teacher's pet. I thought, "I beat up people for a living. You can't make me a teacher's pet." (both laugh) But I appreciated his gesture, and I said, "No. If I can sit over there, it's fine." After that the relationship was very good. It made me feel good that he would [compliment me]. He'd bring another teacher from next door, and he'd say, "Look, look, look." And he'd say good things [about my work].

One of the things that was really great – and this is how things happen. He said to me, "You know, if you keep going the way you're going and you graduate from high school, I promise you a scholarship to my alma mater of Redlands for $5,000 a year." I was polite and nodded and agreed and was thankful, but I had no inkling of what going to college meant. It was just as foreign to me at that time as if you received a call right now and [were told], "By the way, President Bush wants you to run with him as vice president." That's about as foreign as it was to me.

I didn't see him again because I dropped out. But it was a very nice gesture. Those things stay with you thirty years, even though sometimes we think that what we say to kids. . . .

CM: And then it has the impact.

JM: Yes.

CM: Delayed reaction.

JM: That's right. That seed, I tell you, it seems like it goes in one ear and out the other, but it doesn't. It stays back there and then germinates at the right time.

CM: Jaime, you said that in the adult school you were able to finish the last two years in six months.

JM: Right.

CM: What was the organization of the adult school diploma program at the time that you were able to accelerate like that?

JM: At the time, it was go at your pace. If a slower pace is what you needed, then [you went] at your pace. It was an individualized self-paced kind of instruction. Open entry – open exit.

CM: That was pretty early for open entry – open exit programs.

JM: Yes, but you know, in retrospect, people were coming in and out all the time, so you didn't have much of a real choice. If you were motivated and had the skills to read, to comprehend, and do those things, then you could go at a faster pace. If you had somebody encouraging you, taking the material, and correcting it, and giving you more, then you could go fast. I do remember that I was so desperate to succeed that I would stay at night and study as late as possible in the daytime. Then I got a job at night on the weekends at the Greyhound depot down at the border, and I had twelve-hour shifts for three days. From twelve o'clock on to about five o'clock in the morning, there was nothing [to do, so I studied].

CM: There wasn't much going on.

JM: No, there wasn't much going on. So I would study and take the tests. That structure was very good for me because I could do it at whatever speed I [wanted to], as long

as I proved that I knew the materials. I did it through the tests and everything else, the assignments they gave me.

I remember one particular time Mr. Mills – I was taking English with him at that time, and he lived and still lives a couple of blocks from the school – he said, "I forgot to get . . . ." whatever it was. "I need to run home and get it." He said, "In the meantime, Jaime's going to be in charge of the class, and if you have any questions about English, you need to ask him. (both laugh) I thought, "Oh, boy!"

CM: Teacher's pet again. Have to watch that.

JM: Yes. But I'll tell you that I learned more about the structure of English and English itself in adult school. The reason for that is that you have to ferret [the material] out yourself. When you do that, and when you're motivated –

CM: You're responsible for your own learning.

JM: Right.

CM: You did all these things outside of class. Was there a kind of group class when you were there?

JM: They were mainly adults, and the group was there, but it was totally different than in high school. By the way, I appreciated that because in high school, I told you, I was not the Boy Scout type. You always had these problems hanging out with other kids. And they were not [in the adult school], so you just walked around [without] these things on your shoulder. You walked into [the adult school], and people were there for business. The adults were there to study, and it was quiet. But there was no group, like a class or – that was it.

CM: Did the adult school have graduation then?

JM: Yes, they did.

CM: Did you go through the graduation ceremony?

JM: Yes, I did. It was held at Sweetwater High School at the time.

CM: Did the rest of your brothers and sisters finish school when they got here?

JM: Yes. The younger ones did; the older ones did not. My brother Carlos did graduate from Mar Vista High School, and my sister graduated from Castle Park High School.

CM: Okay. I know you went on to the community college. Did you do that right away?

JM: Right away. And I worked full time all the time. You can tell where you have the voids in your education, especially if you come from another country, because when you're put to the test, even though you're fluent in English, when you get to the academic level, there are things [you do not know]. I remember having some difficult times, but I was determined that I was not going to fail. I was not going to fail. There were times when I thought, "These are hard courses, so I'm just going to take two of them," or "I'm going to take four of them, depending on the nature of the courses, but I am going to plot my way so that I will not fail." Anyway, it took me a while, and I graduated from there and went on to San Diego State and moved on.

CM: What kind of work did you do while you were in college?

JM: Well, let's see. I worked at the Greyhound depot, as I told you, down at the border selling tickets. That was one. I worked at Rohr quite a bit, some assembly job. I worked at night. I also worked as a teacher aide with the Sweetwater Union High School District under a Manpower Training and Development Act (MTDA) [contract class]. The idea behind that was to take heads of household and retrain them in some occupation so that they could get jobs. Well, I worked with them for almost two

years. One of them was in upholstering, so I had to learn to upholster because I was going to help the teacher. I was a teacher aide, and I couldn't do that if I didn't learn to upholster. So I learned – fortunately, the gentleman was very, very good.

CM: You've got a second career ahead of you here.

JM: Yes, Yes. So I learned to upholster. Oh, I'll tell you something [about] having learned to upholster and use the sewing machine and all that sort of thing. When I was at Palomar High School, the cholos started [wearing] these [huge] pants. I don't know if you've ever seen the pants that were like three or four times, five times bigger than they were. I said, "No. We're not going to have those pants here. You're not going to have them." I got fed up with constantly just telling them. I said to them, "Okay. When you go [on] Christmas break, I want you to tell your parents to give you a gift, at least two pants that fit you. I don't mean skin tight or anything else, but fit you normally. And if you don't, you bring your parents. When you come in. . . . " There's one entry and one exit. "So when you come in, I'm going to be sitting here with a sewing machine, and I'm going to have a robe, and you will go into that bathroom, you will take off those pants, you toss them to me, and you put your robe on, and I'm going to sew them along the side until they fit you." "Well, what about my pockets?" "You'll have no pockets." "You don't know how to sew." I said, "Well, try me."

School started after Christmas, and I had my sewing machine there. Just for effect, I'm sewing some other stuff, just to let them know. The first one comes in, and he says, "Okay." He goes in [the bathroom] and throws out the pants, and I start to [sew them]. He comes out yelling, "No, no, no." He said, "I'll call my mom and she

can take [me home to change]." It was always a battle. At any rate, I learned something from that.

CM: That's a delightful story. Now, you said you were a teacher's aide. Was that because you had made up your mind you wanted to be a teacher, so you went to seek a job as a teacher's aide.

JM: Yes. There was another thing. A friend of mine got out of the army. He'd just come back from Vietnam. He talked about teaching, too. He said, "You know, there's an opportunity to volunteer at Head Start." Do you know Head Start?

CM: Yes.

JM: So we went to Logan Heights and signed up for Head Start. During the time that we had off from work, we would go over to the school. Since he worked nights and I worked nights, we would go over to the school [together]. When we didn't have a class, we'd go over to the little schools in Logan Heights, and we'd help these little kids.

CM: Little bitty ones, Yes.

JM: Little tiny kids.

CM: They love having men for teachers, and there aren't very many men that work with the really young ones.

JM: It's just amazing, because they were so easily distracted. I had this ring, and they just loved the ring. So I had to come back without a ring because, otherwise, they wanted to talk about the ring and what kind of stone it is. I worked there, I worked at Rohr. What else did I do? Those were the main kind of things.

CM: You worked quite a while as the youth program director.

JM: Yes. The War on Poverty established the San Diego County Economic Opportunity Commission. At the time, if you remember, in the late sixties and early seventies, it was an era of activism. But it was also an era of trying to improve your community. It was based on the philosophy espoused by Kennedy. And for those of us who grew up in that [environment, we accepted that philosophy]. To this day, that's what governs my [actions].

CM: To serve.

JM: To serve. It was that kind of thing. The activism was to take on the establishment if it wasn't serving the needs of the community. At first, [the Teen Center was] under the Metropolitan Area Advisory Committee, which is the MAAC program, and I started working with them in the very first teen post in San Ysidro. Then I worked as a teacher aide. Later I went back [to the teen post] again, and this time it was under the Economic Opportunity Commission. Now, these teen posts were specifically set up for what they called at the time "hard core kids." Now they're "at risk."

CM: Different terminology, same kids.

JM: Yes. Kids that had been kicked out of school, kids that had been in trouble with the law, those kinds of kids that were not Boy Scout kids. I worked in San Ysidro for a number of years with these kids, and it gave me great skills in terms of leadership, in terms of dealing with – because in that setting, you dealt with a kid of the lowest rung.

CM: Wherever he was.

JM: Yes. Of the lowest rung. And you also dealt with politicians. There was no question that at any given point in time I would be dealing with Frank Currant, who was a

mayor at that time, and talking with him. Or Pete Wilson, who was another mayor at the time. He went on to become a governor. Or Pete Chacon, who was an assemblyman. Any of those folks, because they were trying to be deeply involved in those issues so that all of that fire that was in the community would sort of subside and there wouldn't be all these riots. If you remember those kinds of things could happen. It was not unusual for them to be in touch with grass roots people who were [community leaders] or were directors [of programs]. That gave me very, very good skills.

In retrospect, within that setting, you became a leader within the group. You couldn't rely on the authority establishing any kind of structure because you were out there by yourself with these teens, so you developed skills to deal with people. Not only [with youth, but also] with the politicians and everyone else. That was very good for me.

Then I was asked if I would go to the central office, which was downtown. My responsibility was for the entire program in the county. We had centers in Oceanside all the way to San Ysidro. That gave me even more experience in terms of administration. That was really the main work while I was about to finish college.

CM: And great preparation for the schools, actually. Your entire career in education since 1973 has been in the Sweetwater District.

JM: Yes.

CM: Is there anything particularly memorable about your first teaching job, your first principal, anything –

JM: Oh, Yes, well – (chuckles) The first teaching job was [for] Mr. Scarborough. I was already older than most of the kids that get out of college with a degree, so I knew what made an organization function and where you go [to get the job]. I put a folder together with my resume and everything else. I had been working in the community with these kids, so people knew me. For better or for worse, people knew me, because I was an activist. I had already had my degree for about a year, but I had not gone into [teaching]. I finally decided [to do it].

I showed up at the school to see Mr. Scarborough, the junior high school principal. That was the school that served the community in which I grew up. That's what I wanted to do. He said, "Why didn't you go to the personnel department?" I said, "Because I know that you're the one that does the hiring, and you make the recommendation. Why am I going to go over there? If you don't want me, then I won't get a job." He looked at [my folder], and he said, "Don't go anywhere. Don't tell anybody you're looking for a job." This was around May. He said, "I will get you here." So around August, I'd forgotten about it. Then I got a call, and he said, "I've got a job for you." When I went over to get the job, there was no assignment. (both laugh) I said, "What am I going to do?"

CM: You're a teacher at large. (laughs)

JM: Yes. He said, "Well, for right now, just kind of walk around and talk to the kids." My biggest surprise was this. I always felt that if you were nice to people, they'd be nice back. Well, guess what.

CM: It doesn't always work that way.

JM: It doesn't always work. Now I was not in my environment. These kids didn't know me. I just thought they knew me. There was a kid that was being punished, and he was outside. I went by and said, "How ya' doin'? How come you're out here?" And he cussed me out. (laughs) Uh-oh. This is a different ballgame here.

[When there was an opportunity to become an assistant principal], I applied. Being an assistant principal is hard. No teacher sends you kids on a referral saying, "I want you to see this kid because he's so wonderful."

CM: 'Cause he's such a nice boy. (laughs)

JM: No. They send them to you when they're bad. [After working as an assistant principal for a while], I applied for a principalship, and I got the job. I got a call in the middle –

[end tape one, side A; begin tape one, side B]

CM: Okay. You got a call at six-thirty one morning.

JM: I got a call, it was the middle of the summer, and there was the superintendent. His exact words were, "Congratulations. You have been appointed as the next principal of National City Junior High School, and you have a meeting with forty or fifty irate parents tonight. The chief of police is going to be there. I have to be there. And the elementary school superintendent also has to be there. They want to know what the hell you're going to do about National City Junior High School." (both laugh)

CM: That's a great introduction. I want to go back just a little bit, though. You got your administrative work through a special fellowship, and I would like for you to tell us about that.

JM: Okay. That was kind of an interesting – let me backtrack a little bit. My experience in being a director in the teen center, such as it was, was dealing with the basic needs of students. I remember taking students to the hospital because they'd been stabbed. I remember picking up kids from behind a building because the mother or the dad were drug addicts. I mean, just the basic needs. And remember why I went into education, to serve the needs of those kids that grew up around my community. Then I went into teaching, but it was not the same. I found some rules that were not totally what I thought they should be. A kid would almost get his head ripped off because he wore a hat, and I saw no sense in it. I thought, I have to get out of here. I don't want to be here. I need to do some other job if this is the way it's going to be, if I'm expected to do this to these kids. That's not what I signed up for. That's not what I want to do.

While I was teaching, I was asked if I was interested in working at the district office managing a grant by the federal government for desegregation and integration. It's called the ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) program. I said, "Sure." So I [did that]. After a year or so, they [started] selecting people and nominating people for a program that would take eighteen candidates from throughout the county to give them a fellowship under the Carnegie Institute to get an M.A. and [an administrative credential]. I was nominated as one of them. I didn't

want to become an administrator, because I saw these guys tearing kids heads off. I didn't want to do that. So I deliberately dragged my feet on that.

Then time lapsed. I thought, Okay, I'm safe. I don't have to become an administrator. The superintendent called me in. Now, remember, I was an activist.

CM: He said, "I want you."

JM: Remember, I was a community activist, and you remember what the community activists did. They were a thorn in the establishment's side. He called me in and he said, "We asked you to apply . . . ." I said, "I know, but I've been so busy with the programs here that I just forgot. The timeline passed, and I can't do it." He said, "Well, I'm going to move that timeline. You were nominated." I said, "I know it's an honor." He said, "Let's skip the honors. Let's get down to brass tacks." He said, "You, along with many others, are complaining that there's not enough [minority] representation in education – " and this and that. "Here's the time for you to either put up or shut up." So I got into it, and I'm glad I did, because the effect that you can have [on the system] as a leader [is great].

CM: You can make changes.

JM: You can make changes. I was smart enough to recognize that the changes were now from within, and working with the institutions rather than out there mao-maoing people. So those changes began to be effected in my first principalship. When I got there, as I told you, it was chaos. It was chaos because the previous principal [just wanted to be nice]. When these kids would do things, she'd say, "Well, it's part of their culture. We just have to understand."

Let me give you an example. One kid came in and he was under the influence of drugs. I got him and brought him in, and he said, "Hey, man, why you doin' this to me, man? You know, you're Chicano, I'm Chicano. You know it's part of the culture." I said, "You're right. It's part of the culture. But it's part of every culture, and in every culture there is the law, and I am the law." Boom. That was the beginning of the cleanup, and that was when we started cleaning up the school. Now it's a nice little school.

The fellowship was really good for me because [I became part of] a group that had similar direction and philosophy, an avenue by which they could become something beyond the classroom and take a place in changing an organization.

CM: Was it run through San Diego State?

JM: Yes, it was. It was Dr. Merino who ran the program.

CM: You actually moved very rapidly up the administrative ladder, and I'm sure that it was because of this fellowship that you got in on.

JM: Yes, yes.

CM: You worked as vice principal at several schools and then got your first principalship, and so on. You spent longer than anywhere else in the district at Palomar.

JM: Yes.

CM: The continuation school. Why was that assignment attractive to you?

JM: There were a couple of things. One, I had been [principal] in Mar Vista [High School for six years], and Mar Vista was where I had gone to school. It was fun.

CM: Actually before we talk about Palomar, I want to go back to Mar Vista, because you *were* principal at Mar Vista. There were still some teachers there.

JM: Yes. There were three of them that had been my teachers.

CM: How was that? Talk about that.

JM: When I was notified that I got the job at Mar Vista, I couldn't sleep for about a week. I'd already been in a school that I had to go and clean up. That wasn't a problem. The thing that kept me awake at night was, I am going to be the supervisor of three teachers that were my teachers. What if I have to tangle with one of them? How was I going to interact with them? Well, having come from Mexico, the culture [is very respectful of teachers]. I still call Mr. Mills [by his last name]. I don't call him Burke. Yet, I was his supervisor for six years. That's the kind of thing that I was dealing with. It was an interesting set of emotions that I went through when I got the job.

When I finally got there, during my first faculty meeting, I said to them as we finished the faculty meeting, "I want you to remember one thing. I want you to remember that what you say to kids and how you say it creates an impact in their life." I said, "No matter whether there are thousands of kids and if you don't even remember what you say, because we say things all the time, what you say to that kid and how you say it will make an impact, [and you never know who will come back to be your principal]."

I turned to Mr. Mills, who was sitting there, and I said, "Mr. Mills, I can tell you right now what you said to me word for word twenty-five years ago, and I appreciate everything that you did and said to me. And that created an impact on my life." I turned to another one, and I said, "Mr. Bush, I don't remember what you said to me word for word. I've got to be honest with you. But I do remember that it was a

warm feeling and friendly feeling being around you and in your class." And then quickly I turned to another one and said, "And you, sir, I will see you after this meeting." (both laugh) I was kidding, of course, but he was not particularly a warm person.

So the next morning he was waiting for me by the time I got [to school] at six-thirty. He did say to me, "Did I treat you badly?" And I said, "No, you didn't. You didn't treat me badly, but you had no reason to treat me badly because I was an A student in your class." He said to me, "Did I give you A's?" I said, "You didn't give me A's. I earned them." I said, "If you'll remember, you had a policy that if one person – only one person could do this in the whole class – if he got 100 percent on the chapter test, you got to skip the other chapter test, and you got 100 percent on that chapter test provided you did [the chapter questions]." In essence you did all the other work. You just didn't take the test. I said, "Remember that? Well, I always got 100, and that's why I always got A's in your class." I said, "I do remember that you were not very complimentary to any kids. You never said a word to me. You never said good job or anything else. Other teachers wrote [things on my report card]. You never wrote anything. And you never wrote [comments] to any of the kids. I hope you've changed."

CM: So you just kind of took the bull by the horns and said, "Here I am."

JM: Yes. And I had fun. Time for nostalgia was very short because there was a lot of work [to do]. We had to set up advanced placement courses. We had to do many things. The work days were twelve, thirteen hours a day, and when you went home, you were still not there mentally. You were still thinking about what you didn't do

and what you had to do tomorrow and what will get you in real trouble if you don't address it first thing in the morning. Then there were all the games – it was fun – all the football games, all the baseball games, etc. We had forty-two teams. If you just went to one or two games, you were always out of the house. [At first] it was fun. But after six years . . . .

Then what happened – the main thing was my daughters began junior high school. One of the board members one time said to me, "Jaime, you are now in a high school. You'll find out now that it's far more demanding than anything else." He said, "Never make the mistake that I made. I was always at meetings, I was always [gone]." He said, "My kids are now forty-five years old, and every time they get mad, they say to me, 'Dad, you have no reason to talk about anything. You were always [out] raising somebody else's kid except your own.'"

Then one day – several times, actually, a teacher would highlight the written assignments of our kids, and they would tell my wife, "Show them to your husband." They would say, "My dad was at work. My dad couldn't be there. My dad was at this thing." And I thought, "That's it. No matter whose kids you save, if you don't save your own . . . ."

So the [position] opened up at Palomar [and I transferred]. That was the kind of student I wanted to work with anyway, so I took the job. It was good, and I liked it, but you know, ten years [there] was also enough. It was time to move on.

CM: There were both good and bad things at the continuation school.

JM: Yes.

CM: I understand you had to meet your students at the level they were at, whatever that might have been. Do you want to tell us about a couple incidents there?

JM: Before I tell you about the incidents – I, along with many people, had complete misunderstanding of what the school population was. When I was at the other schools, I only sent kids [to Palomar] that got into serious trouble. Unfortunately, I formulated this opinion that all the kids that were there were a bunch of losers, druggies, and stuff like that. I hate to say that, but [I didn't have a high opinion of] the parents [either]. When I got there, I [found out that I was] absolutely wrong.

Here's what I found out. Socioeconomic level was from low to very high. Parent education was from low to very high [as well]. And, the overwhelming majority of the kids were there because they didn't like school, and they were [excessively] absent - not because they were bad kids. They didn't fit into [the traditional school] environment. They didn't like school. They were disconnected from school, and, therefore, they ended up not going to school and being sent to Palomar because – you know, time is the worst enemy of a student. The semester passes, and if you're a slow learner, well, that's just too bad. Or if you made some mistakes or if you were absent, that's just too bad. The semester ends, and you end with it, and you get your F. And so many kids ended up that way [and were then sent to Palomar.

But then there were others. There was that small percentage of students that did some bad things. That was also a cleanup job for me. They would challenge me, and they would cuss me out. I instituted some policies with the help of the teachers,

and we started turning it around. The first four years, we were taking a gun a year out of there, and that was just the ones we knew about.

[I eventually transferred out of Palomar because I sustained permanent disabilities.] I got hurt three times. It was just really terrible, and I thought, I can't afford [to continue to get hurt]. I can't see a fight and not break it up. [That is how] I got hurt, and the last time – I'll tell you that left a bitter, bitter taste in my mouth. The teachers had been asking [for] metal detectors. I said, "I don't want to do that."

Anyway, the fourth gun. I ran into a campus assistant, and something was going on in the bathroom. He called me. We marched in to the kids, him in the back and I'm in the front, and told them, "Don't put your hands in your pockets. I don't want you to get rid of whatever it is." Because they were definitely doing something. One of the reasons why I didn't want them to have bulky clothing –

CM: Because you can hide things in it.

JM: You can hide so many things. So this one kid has these pants that are already wrapped around ten, fifteen times, and he's got this jean jacket that looks like it's made in prison. I said, "Okay, gentlemen, you know why you're here." By this time, the campus assistant goes over and picks up from the trash a Mickey wide mouth beer. It was nine o'clock in the morning. I said, "Let's put the stuff here." "Well, you know, we got our rights." "No, you don't have a right." I said, "Afterwards, you've got a right. You can take me to court and do whatever you want, but right now we're going to see [what you have]." One guy says to me, "Oh, I know what you're looking for." And he takes out another beer from his pocket. I go to search him again, and he

goes, "Oh, wait a minute." By the time he finishes, he's got four more beers out of his pocket, but you couldn't tell because his pants are so big.

CM: A whole six pack was in there.

JM: Yes. I kiddingly said to him, "What is it? Do you have a refrigerator in there?" But I was going to search him no matter what. He jumped back, but I felt something, and it felt metallic. I said, "Give it to me." He said, "No." So we went back and forth, and finally he tells me, "It's going to be embarrassing. Can I give it to you in the bathroom?" I don't want to demean or embarrass anybody. I said, "Sure." Well, I'm not going to take him to the bathroom. I took him to the other office. We get into the other office, and he refuses completely. I said, "You either give it to me . . . ." And I thought, "This has got to be hard drugs because nobody puts a fight like this for marijuana. This has got to be something hard like cocaine or heroin."

He begins to be wild-eyed, begins to stand up, and begins to [look desperate]. "You're not taking anything from me." I thought, "Oh, God, I don't want to do this." I already had been hurt twice. It was a break time. I opened the door to get one of the teacher's attention to come and help me. When I opened the door, the student hit me hard and threw the door open and ran. I went after him, and I caught him. He went for his pocket, and I thought, I don't know what it is, but I'm not letting him take it out. We wrestled around, and he kind of twisted me, and oh, God, I felt like a shock of electricity went right through my back. But I wouldn't let go.

Finally, I yelled loud enough for Mr. von Sydow, who came over and grabbed him by the feet and brought him in. I finally twisted his arm out of the way, and I reached in there and he had a loaded gun. I don't believe that he wanted to take it out

and shoot me. We confiscated it. My first year [as principal], I confiscated five guns out of the junior high school: a .357 magnum loaded with hollow points, two .38s, and a .22 caliber.

Then we had a [teacher] strike the first year, too. Then one of the teachers killed his 38-year-old son. So I was baptized by fire. That was all right. I just figured it was part of the job. That's what I'd done all the time. I would jump fences and go after the kids and get them, and all that sort of thing.

But here's what left a bitter taste in my mouth [at Palomar]. The teachers were up in arms because they said, "What if he would have taken out the gun? One of us would have been shot. We keep telling you that we need this or we need that," [referring to metal detectors]. And I don't blame them. "We've asked the previous administrator, we've asked the District."

I did some research, and I went to my supervisor. I said, "I need you to okay this. We can do the metal detection here." He said, "We have to go to Cabinet." Cabinet is the superintendent, all of the deputies [and principals], as you know. I went over. And I was hurting. I'd been to the doctor and I was under a lot of medications. I told my tale of woe about the four guns [at Palomar] and about all those things. I said, "And then this is what happened, and my back – " This is really the one that got me. The finance officer, who also is the risk management officer, as soon as I finished [telling what happened], raised his hand and said, "First, I want to know why we have such stupid principals that take guns away from students." How do you think that made me feel? I was furious.

Anyway, bottom line was the superintendent said, "No. It's bad public relations to do that." All the other principals agreed [with me]. Let him have it. That's the school that needs something like that. But the superintendent said, "No. It's bad public relations." And the risk management also said the same thing, so we got nothing.

Anyway, that was what angered me in that situation. But like I said, the overwhelming majority of the kids [at Palomar are] great kids, good kids. You know what made it really good? It's something that [happens in] adult schools, too, and that's [teachers] make a connection [with their students].

CM: I was going to ask you about comparing continuation and adult schools.

JM: Here's the thing. Adult schools give a second opportunity to those who didn't have it, for whatever reason, or decide not to take it. Continuation high schools do the same. Adult schools establish a more personal relationship. Continuation high schools do it, too. They're smaller, and so are the adult schools. Both of them have that kind of thing. It's an alternative program for people, and it's open entry-open exit.

We both recognize that kids and people learn best when there's interaction [between the student and the teacher], not just when you give somebody a book. You have to strike a balance, and that's always a problem, trying to strike a balance. I see that same thing happening in adult school. We accommodate people that must come in and out and have their own way of learning, and they have their own speed of learning. The same thing in the continuation high school. We had to find ways to

interact with them in actively teaching them as opposed to just: Here, here's a contract. You do it, and when you're finished, I'll give you the test.

The most important part that I have seen in both is not the style with which you deliver the instruction but the connection that the teacher makes with the student. That is the most important part. A student will do most anything if he likes you and you're his friend. If he hates you, and you are an arrogant teacher that knows the material and you want to shove it down his throat, with all this technology and everything else, it won't matter because that student may survive you, but you have not made a lifelong learner of that student.

CM: Other than the direct relationship with students, you had some major accomplishments at Palomar, at least one of which you're trying to duplicate now at the adult school, and that was a free medical clinic. Tell me how you got that going and what it did.

JM: Okay. First, the major accomplishments, all of the accomplishments, no matter where I've been, have been because the teachers have decided to do something. All I have been is the catalyst that provides them the wherewithal, or opens the avenues for them to do it. Many times those avenues are closed, and even if they want to do it, those avenues are closed. Right off the top, that's why things occur.

Major accomplishments: One of them was AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination). I don't know if you know what AVID is. That's a program that was started by Mary Catherine Moore. She believed that if you emulate the pattern in which students [grow up in] middle class families that you can, in fact, also make changes with those that are underachieving in lower socioeconomic levels;

that if you begin to systematically teach them how to study, expose them to a rigorous curriculum, to give them the skills, to give them the support, to bring the parents in, that you can make a difference. And in fact she has. That's one of the most successful programs in the country as far as getting kids to four-year colleges.

I had been in Mar Vista, and I was fortunate enough to have a teacher tell me she wanted the program. It's an exemplary program. I went to Palomar, and I wanted to do the same thing. Fortunately, again I found a teacher who was just one of the *best* teachers that I've had the good fortune of working with, Arlene Fink. Arlene Fink decided that she was going to make that work. But they said to us, "No. This is not for a continuation high school because you don't have the college prep requirements, and our program is to send students to a university, not a community college." Well, Arlene Fink thought differently, and she said, "If you'll support me, we will get through this." She stayed with it until it was done, and we became the first one and became a national model demonstration school thanks to this teacher. Up to that point, no continuation high schools had been given the opportunity to do this. And so what if we send kids to a community college?

So that was one. The other one – again, I just supported the teachers. Many of the kids that are there, sometimes they'll find their light later on, and their light may be a professional career. But at that point in their life, they didn't want to study, and we turned them around. They want to learn something to get out and get a job. All I did was support the teachers in establishing an internship program. We tried it with businesses and everything else, but business wanted to do their job, a shadowing

one day and get out. The navy was the only one that said, "We will take your kids for three hours a day, five days a week, and we will . . . ." The old kind of personal –

CM: Apprenticeship.

JM: Apprenticeship program. And they have done a good job. We have sent hundreds of kids through there, and many of the kids are now supervisors. They're not recruiting them to go in the navy.

CM: I was going to say, do many of them join the navy?

JM: No. Not proportionately, no. It is not a recruitment program. They work in dental labs, they work in medical labs, in computer things. I remember one time one kid was pretty good with computers. They were having a contest who could design a particular parking lot that was kind of difficult to get parking set up. It was North Island. He asked if he could enter the contest, and we had been teaching CAD, computer assisted drafting. The kid won the design. So it was good.

For us here at the adult school, we were working with Job Corps. Job Corps was recently moved to Imperial Beach because it's closer and they don't have to get up so early and come over to National City. We also work with the veteran programs, as you know, for providing programs for them. So those kinds of things like that.

The other one that I'm trying now to do is a partnership that took us two years to get into effect, and that was a partnership with UC [University of California] Medical School, Scripps, in Sweetwater District to put our free clinic on site. Now, free clinics had a very bad connotation because a few years earlier, they set up a free clinic in San Diego city, and it became extremely controversial because it focused on birth control and all that sort of stuff. So free clinics got that kind of thing. It took us

a while, but it's set up. Now, as a result of that, other schools are setting up their programs. I called the doctors – so anyway, I'm trying to get that done.

One of the things I believe in is that if we look at the person in a holistic manner, then you're able to address their educational needs much better, anywhere, but especially adults. If adults don't have a job, don't have the skills, how can they concentrate on learning? It becomes a vicious cycle. If they can't learn, then they won't get the better jobs. And if they don't have anything to sort of bolster their situation, then they're going to [stagnate]. One of the things that I want to do [is to bring free medical services to the school] because I've seen that many of the people don't have insurance to get medical assistance for the family and for themselves. If I can get [services located] here and we can do health screenings and help them with that, [it would be helpful]. It takes a while, and I've made initial contacts, so we'll see how it goes. But that's one of my [projects] right now.

CM: That's great. That's great. You've mentioned several times that you've been a community activist. You're still very active in your community.

JM: Not as active as I would [like to be]. The reason for that – there are a couple of things. One is, any new job [requires your energy and presence]. I'm sure you're familiar with the absentee principal.

CM: Yes.

JM: I never want to be referred to as the absentee principal, especially when you get a new job. To give you an example, [our school is going through] hard times financially. If the head custodian's out during the daytime, we don't replace him. I'm used to hands-on, [so I do the essential part of his work]. I was at the school, and one person, a

student, came along and said, "Mr. Mercado, the women's rest room doesn't have any toilet paper." So I went over and got a bunch of toilet paper and knocked on the door, took it in, etc. They said, "Mr. Mercado, you shouldn't be doing that." "Why not?"

CM: Who's going to if you don't? (laughs)

JM: (laughs) "Well, you're the principal. That's kind of embarrassing." I said, "I'll tell you what's embarrassing. The person sitting on the pot realizes there's no toilet paper, that's embarrassing." That kind of an approach to things gives you an insight into the school and makes you more available to people so they can tell you what they need, as opposed to being gone too much of the time.

One of the things I do is, when I take a job, that's my concentration. That's where I owe my time, not at the district office doing their work, not out in the community doing somebody else's work. [Later], as I get an opportunity, I will. I've gotten involved with various kinds of things, but mostly right now is the St. Anthony's project. They're trying to improve the Old Town National City now that revitalization is at hand. Sometimes revitalization means we're going to improve the properties, and the poor people that are there are going to be kicked out. That's one of the things we're looking at [so that won't happen].

The other thing is, as I told you, my mom and my dad are homebound, they can hardly get up, so we have to have caregivers twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. My brother and I have now taken responsibility to be there all the time, and that's been real, real hard. That's where my concentration is.

CM: Okay. This is your third year at National City?

JM: No, this is the second year.

CM: This is your second year at National City. Okay. What was it like to return to adult education after all these years?

JM: First of all, I was used to all of this intense activity and intense demand for my time. When I went to the adult school, it reminded me of the things that I remembered: the serene environment; the fact that everybody who's here, by and large, wants to be here; and they're very grateful for things that you do for them. It's just a different environment. Teachers have more opportunity for actual teaching and engaging the students in discussion, rather than having to deal with a lot of students who are disrupting the entire class. Just a real pleasant environment all the way around.

As I'm at the entrance when people come in and I'm greeting them, "Good morning. How are you?" they say, "Good morning, teacher. Is Ms. Peck here today?" "Yes, she is, but she's going to be in the lab in 201. Take the stairs, go to the left." "Okay. Thank you." "Good morning, teacher. Is the test going to be done for . . .?" "Yes." "What room?" One guy came in, who is not an English learner. He said, "My God, this is Wal-Mart." (both laugh) I thought, I have become a Wal-Mart greeter here.

CM: Can you give us just a very short profile of the school?

JM: The school is one of the oldest schools, if not the oldest school, in the district. It was on the campus of Sweetwater High School, as were all the other [adult] schools [on high school campuses]. That's why we always think of it, those of us who went to that, as night school. Obviously, the need for different hours for educating adults [made it] necessary to extend [the schedule]. That was not possible [on a high school campus]. So this was one of the schools that was the outcome of a collaborative

project between the City of National City, [the Trolley Authority], and the Sweetwater District, in which the trolley actually donated the land for a dollar a year, provided that an educational institution for adults was placed on that site. Then the school was built.

Now, [the school population] reflects the community. The community is overwhelmingly Hispanic with some Filipino population and other Asian populations. As such, of course, one of the main programs there is ESL. There's a great number of students come in to enroll. I would say [1,200 to 2,000 are enrolled] at a given point in time [including classes in the community]. I think it's a great building. [The faculty is relatively new.]

One of the things that's been really good is that Mrs. [Lynne] Robinson [former principal at National City Adult School] was very good about providing for the students, and it showed the warmth and care that she had. The kind of environment she [established] for them [included] having a caterer provide food that costs less than $2.50, so that they can eat something there without having to go someplace else and get charged $5. All of that environment was already set. I thought, "This is great, this is great."

The profile, again, is a large Hispanic population, large ESL program with technology, and then in a CBET (Community Based English Tutoring) program [in the elementary schools].

CM: Generally speaking, a comprehensive adult school.

JM: Oh, I've got to tell you this story. Hard times come by, and you start cutting things. I looked around, and I said, "We've got to cut telephones." I started cutting telephones.

I looked around, and I said, "How much is the water?" I see ten, fifteen jugs of water lined up. I said, "How much is the water?" The secretary said, "A thousand, twelve hundred a year." I said, "Well, you know, [we need] paper for the students and the machines. I'll put in one of these purifiers and go with that." The secretaries were beginning to look uneasy, and Ann Vroom, whom you know, says, "Oh, my God!" Because she's a water drinker. I said, "Well, times are hard." One of the secretaries says to me, "The water sometimes here is really dirty coming out of the faucet. Do you know what was here before?" I said, "You know, I didn't, but one night I was here late at night. Nobody was here. I turned off the lights just before I went home. I heard 'mooo.'" What was on that site before was a slaughter house. [They didn't appreciate the joke.] Anyway, we didn't cut the water budget.

CM: Do you have any standardized methods of recognizing your successful students?

JM: Yes. That was something that was here. I can't take credit for any of this stuff. All of this reflects the previous administration. A fairly extensive scholarship [program].

CM: Where do you get the money for the scholarships?

JM: Part is the ASB [Associated Student Body]. We sell things in ASB. Then also faculty and staff donations. But LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens), CABE, the California Association of Bilingual Educators, Pepsi, and National City [also donate] scholarships. These are the kinds of things that the students get. In addition to that, there is a newspaper that will feature [profiles of] students.

CM: Okay. So a newspaper is a work product of the Associated Student Body. That's nice. Okay. If you could just kind of wave a magic wand and have anything you wanted for your school, what would be a couple of wishes?

JM: What would it be? Having spent the last year in cutting programs and cutting teachers' hours and cutting teachers from jobs, I would restore those things. It hasn't been fun. One of the things I find is that many teachers earn their living [only from adult school], and they don't have tenure. They're subject to the whims of attendance or a physical location [off campus] that may be removed because they're using it for something else. It's heartbreaking to see someone when you have to say, "I'm closing your classes. You no longer have either a job or you no longer have medical benefits." That's been the hardest. So if I could wave a wand, those would be the kinds of things that I would restore into the system.

I think that adult school teachers rely a lot on their own personal ability to teach the classes, because, especially in ESL, if they infuse too much technology, the students get a little upset They want the teacher. So if there was one wish, that would be the thing, to restore those programs and the funding and the hours and all kinds of [services].

CM: All right. Anything else? Any burning topics you want to –

JM: No. I think – it's been great. It's been great going to the adult school. It sort of restores what you believe in: the fact that smaller, more personal classes, keeping in mind the needs of the learner and the needs of the teacher, are obviously more effective than anything else you can think of. I've seen them both at Palomar and in the adult schools. That's really kind of my thoughts as I wind up.

CM: I think you're an ideal person to be there.

JM: It's been fun. It's been fun, and it's been nice. I appreciate the teachers there and the students. It's been nice.

CM: Kind of a nice closing of the circle. I want to thank you for sharing your experiences.

JM: Thank you.

CM: And also for your contributions to adult education as a student, as a leader, and as a model for others. The Adult Education Students Succeed Initiative is part of the California Adult Education Oral History Project.

JM: One of the things that I do want to say, one of the nicest things is it has enabled me to say thank you to a person, [Burke Mills]; whereas, sometimes our life is in such a fast lane that we look in the obituaries and suddenly we say, "My God, I never took the time to thank that man." That's nice.

CM: Good. I'm glad you've gotten a nice –

JM: Yes. And that you've met Mr. Mills. He's just a wonderful person.

CM: Oh, he's wonderful.

JM: He's a nice man. He's lit quite a few fires.

END OF INTERVIEW

Editor's note: Jaime Mercado retired in July 2004. In November he was elected to serve as a member of the Sweetwater Union High School District Board of Trustees.

California Department of Education
Adult Education Oral History Project

Adult Education Students Succeed

Rudolf Kastelic

Sweetwater Union High School District
Division of Adult and Continuing Education
1974 to Present

Director, 1998 to Present

Other Adult Education Assignments

Principal
Assistant Principal
Counselor
Instructor
Instructional Assistant

September 24, 2003
San Diego, California

By Cuba Z. Miller

PROJECT: Adult Education Students Succeed
California Adult Education Oral History Project

INTERVIEWEE: Rudolph Kastelic

INTERVIEWER: Cuba Miller

DATE: September 24, 2003

CM: This is Cuba Miller interviewing Rudolph Kastelic in San Diego, California, on September 24, 2003. Rudy is the Director of Adult Education for the Sweetwater Union High School District. The purpose of the interview is to profile Sweetwater's quality adult education programs and, as a part of the Adult Education Students Succeed Initiative, to comment on the contributions made by Jaime Mercado. Rudy, I want to thank you for nominating Jaime Mercado for California's Adult Education Students Succeed Project.

RK: Absolutely my pleasure.

CM: It will be difficult for our other successful adult school graduates to match Jaime's story. It's very unique. We know that student successes don't just happen. In addition to student initiative, they're the products of quality programs and supportive staff, and that's what we'll be talking about today. Let's start with you. After all, you were selected by two of our professional organizations as the Adult Education Administrator of the Year, so in this case, we know that quality starts at the top. May I offer my congratulations for that recognition?

RK: Thank you very much.

CM: How long have you been with the Sweetwater District, and what were the stepping stones to becoming Director of Adult Education?

RK: I've been with the District for almost thirty years. It'll be thirty years in spring of next year. I started as an instructional assistant in the adult education program. My entire career has been in adult education in Sweetwater. I was an adult school teacher, an adult school counselor. I've been in administration for about twenty years, starting out as an assistant principal, a principal, lead principal, and then Director of Adult Education.[1]

CM: So you have a position of lead principal.

RK: At that time, we had downsized, and we reduced what was formerly a position of assistant superintendent. My mentor, Jerry Rindone, who was an outstanding adult education administrator, was my predecessor.

CM: I knew Jerry fairly well. He was very active statewide.

RK: Absolutely. Instrumental in building the adult education program in Sweetwater and instrumental in the Secretary's Award that we got in 1989.

CM: How long have you been director now?

RK: This is my sixth year.

CM: Tell us just a little bit about the communities that Sweetwater serves and the type of students in your adult education programs.

RK: Well, the geographical area that we extend over ranges from National City in the north, which borders with the city of San Diego, to the international border, and from

[1] Rudy Kastelic comes from an "adult education family." His father was a part-time welding instructor at Sweetwater Adult School from 1940 to 1975. After Rudy left home to attend college, his mother returned to school to earn her high school diploma from Sweetwater Adult School.

the Pacific Ocean in a town called Imperial Beach out to the foothills, almost up to the east county, in San Diego. It includes the city of Chula Vista, which is the second largest city within San Diego County and the seventh fastest growing city in the nation. Very high growth area. A majority of our students, far and away, are Hispanic/Latino, and we have wide mix of other ethnicities as well.

CM: How many adult schools does the district have?

RK: We have four: National City Adult School, serving the communities in the north of our district, primarily National City and Bonita, an unincorporated area; Chula Vista Adult School, obviously serving the city of Chula Vista, that fast-growing city that I mentioned; Montgomery Adult School, which covers the area of south San Diego. There's just a little tip of the city of San Diego that extends out into the bay and comes back in and catches that part of our district. Montgomery Adult School also includes Imperial Beach and the Otay-Mesa area. Then we have San Ysidro Adult School right on the international border.

CM: Are all of the schools comprehensive adult schools?

RK: Yes.

CM: And they all have their own array of satellite locations?

RK: Absolutely. Although they are comprehensive, each of them is unique as well. We have a couple of high-tech hubs. One of them is in National City, which is a school, by the way, on the trolley tracks right at the northern end of the Sweetwater District. We also have a technology hub in Imperial Beach, where our technology programs are just catching on. And we have a school right on the border that's on the other end of the trolley tracks, San Ysidro Adult School. In San Ysidro's case, about half of the

classes are English language acquisition classes. In Chula Vista Adult School's case, they have the largest vocational program among the four within our district. Each of them is unique.

CM: About how many students throughout the district do you serve?

RK: Last year, we served more than 41,000 individuals. That's an unduplicated count. That represented about a little bit better than 6,000 units of a.d.a. (average daily attendance). It takes about 8 students enrolled in the program to come up with a unit of a.d.a.[2]

CM: You must be one of the largest districts in the state, then.

RK: We're fourth largest in terms of a.d.a. We may be second or third in terms of enrollment.

CM: Of course, all adult schools work within the same ten authorized areas. What are your major programs that your schools serve? You mentioned ESL for the second language learners.

RK: ESL (English as a Second Language) is about 30 percent of our program. That includes citizenship.

CM: I'm almost surprised it's not more than that.

RK: Well, we put our efforts in all areas. Our students are fortunate because they can come out of our ESL programs and go into our high school diploma programs, other literacy programs, and vocational programs. And they do. About a third of our program, by the way, is basic literacy through the high school diploma or GED (General Educational Development) equivalency. Right now, about 25 percent are in

[2] One unit of a.d.a. is an aggregated 525 hours of student attendance.

vocational programs, short-term vocational, absolutely job preparation type of classes. Then the remaining 10 or 12 percent, we have a fairly decent sized parent education program, and then a variety of community service type programs.

CM: That's a good balance. That's a very good balance. Rudy, why don't you tell me a little bit about the leadership structure of the adult division that helps to promote quality programs throughout all your schools?

RK: I'm proud that we have a very collaborative structure. We're finding out that we can even improve on that collaboration through the current focus on learning WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) accreditation process that we're going through.

CM: You're going to benefit from that.

RK: Absolutely. It's really time intensive in terms of the faculty and staff, but we've already seen benefits. You'll have people from one school on one edge of the division that meet somebody for the first time at another school on the other edge of the division say, "I've heard about you for years." (chuckles)

We have four schools and a principal at each school. We enjoyed having an assistant principal at each through last year, but with the budget cuts that we're seeing in the state, we cut back in two administrative positions. I'm the Director of Adult Education, and the four adult school principals report to me.

Then we have an Adult Education Resource Center, where we have teachers on special assignment or program managers for our ESL program, our Adult Basic Education program, our high school and GED program, and our Vocational and Technical Education Act, VTEA, Carl Perkins Fund, and CalWORKs (California

Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids, the state's welfare initiative]. They're an integral part of our leadership structure and provide a lot of the quality work that we need to align our curriculum with the standards and to standardize our curriculum across the district, which is a job in itself because we're such a large program.

CM: Such a large district. Now, does each school have resource instructors, or are they district-wide resource teachers?

RK: They're district or divisionwide resource teachers, but they make frequent visits to the schools and work with teachers in groups and on an individual basis.

CM: How many people work in this resource center?

RK: Well, as I said, about five teachers on special assignment. Then they have some clerical staff to support them as well.

As far as leadership structure goes, we have regular meetings of the adult school principals; we have regular meetings of the staff, which include the resource teachers and assistant principals; we have an adult school committee that we've negotiated through the collective bargaining process, and there's representation from each of the adult schools on that group; we've got an advisory committee to our 231 (federal) grant; and we have a seven-year strategic plan committee as well.

CM: So the faculty has input through all of these committees as well.

RK: Yes, absolutely.

CM: That's good. I'd like to talk a little bit about your high school diploma program since Rudy Mercado came through your high school diploma program.

RK: Jaime.

CM: Jaime. (laughs) I know who I'm talking to today, really I do. (laughs)

RK: We've got similarities. (both laugh) We both grew up about the same time.

CM: Okay. Anyway, talk to me a little bit about your high school diploma program. I know you have different approaches to earning a diploma.

RK: Absolutely. Well, we have both a track where a person can get a California high school diploma, and then we've also got a track where people can get a GED equivalency certificate. We offer the classes primarily on an open enrollment basis, open entry-open exit, competency-based. Students progress at their own pace. We do that, naturally, because we want to be able to provide classes or opportunities for people anytime they come in our door. I'm one of those old-time adult educators that is familiar with the term "the hook," where if the student has gone through a process of talking themselves into going back to school, you need to provide a good quality service for them right away.

CM: Or you lose them.

RK: Absolutely correct. But we also have several what we call lecture classes or group instruction classes or managed learning classes to supplement the open entry – open exit, where everybody starts at the same time, and it's teacher-led in terms of the delivery of the curriculum.

CM: That's important sometimes, especially in your social studies classes where exchange of ideas, and so on, are –

RK: And your math classes.

CM: And your math classes.

RK: Absolutely. We have enjoyed a tremendous amount of technology in our programs as well. We have up-to-date computer labs at each of our adult education facilities.

Sometimes we'll have a classroom where maybe there'll be a half a dozen or ten computers, and students can work on them in the open entry – open exit class. We also have labs at most of the schools where a teacher can take an ESL class, for example, on a pullout basis and bring them into a lab once or twice or more a week.

This semester, we even have a class at San Ysidro Adult School where we have one of our teachers that just returned from military leave, and in easing him back into the system because he's really good at technology, we're having him help out the ESL teachers that bring in their students, and we're hoping to see that that's going to be quite a benefit. We're hoping that the students will get excited about it, and at that particular school will start taking more advantage of the business education computer-type classes that they have.

CM: At some point, I read something about you have a project-based curriculum initiative going on.

RK: Well, that's with EL Civics (English Literacy and Civics, a federal program).

CM: That's with EL Civics, not with the high school diploma.

RK: Oh, yes. That's true. At Chula Vista Adult School, we have a couple of teachers, Sandy Hodge in particular, that does a project-based curriculum. She is one dynamic, enthusiastic, energetic person and displays her students' work throughout the classroom, and whenever I go in there or the site principal goes in there, is quick to grab us by the arm and show the kind of work that the students are doing.

CM: Do you have any formalized distance learning in your diploma program?

RK: Yes, we do. We have distance learning in both English as a Second Language and in computer applications. The English as a Second Language program is primarily one

in which students come in, and they check out videotapes. Then they are required to meet weekly with a teacher, have a consultation-type period. We found that we're able to attract some students that aren't able to come to school on a regular basis, and they benefit from that. We've also found that we attract some students that are in our core programs that use that opportunity for supplemental services or instruction and find that we increase our benchmarks[3] that way as well.

CM: And do you allow some credit from ESL to apply toward the diploma?

RK: Yes.

CM: Are they elective, or do they get some English credits?

RK: They're elective credits.

CM: Okay. I'd like to move on to support services. What kind of student support services do you have available? Why don't you start talking about counselors, and then we'll move on to other things.

RK: Okay. I'm proud to say that we have at least one full-time contract counselor at each of the four adult schools. I'm proud to say that because I was a counselor for eight years and know the value of counseling services for students. Their work is primarily in the academic area, with our high school diploma students, with our adult basic education students.

We have some interns from [San Diego State University] in our UCAN (University Career Action Network) program that also assist students with planning beyond adult school into [any of the state's or other universities] or planning for career training as well.

[3] A specified student learning gain, for which adult schools receive payment from their federal projects.

In addition to the four full-time counselors at each of the adult schools, we also have some part-time counselors that fill in where we need them. The reason I'm so proud about that is because when I talk to my colleagues in other parts of the state, when I talk to staff from the legislature, that's an area where it's recognized that we need to provide more and better services, especially to help people plan their educational careers. It's one that adult education programs receive no supplemental funding for. It all comes out of the revenue limit based on the ADA cap. So in order to provide those kinds of services, there's a tradeoff for everything. You have to put that as a priority.

CM: Sometimes you can use some of these special funds to help pay for your counselors, though, the 231 funds, the EL Civics funds.

RK: We don't. We have chosen to fund those through our adult education fund. Surely, that's an option, but by funding it through the adult education fund, we can use those funds for . . . .

CM: As part of the structure.

RK: Yes. And we can use those supplemental funds for other things. Then when there's a roller coaster effect of the funding going up and down, at least we still have our counseling services as a constant.

CM: You mentioned something that I want to do a couple of follow-up questions on. You mentioned that your counselors were full-time contract employees.

RK: Yes.

CM: Do you have many teachers that are full-time contract?

RK: Yes, we do. In the neighborhood of about 35 percent of our teachers are permanent instructors.

CM: Then you mentioned this intern program, which I think sounds wonderful. How did the intern counseling program get set up?

RK: That was a follow up to a phone conversation that one of our counselors had with the department at San Diego State University. The counselor brought that idea to the site administrator and got the support to do that. In one of our schools, San Ysidro, they built a special office for them. The other schools heard about that service as being provided, and they jumped on the bandwagon.

CM: So it's now available at all four of the schools.

RK: It's available at three of the four.

CM: These are people from the university that are working on [pupil] personnel credentials or counseling?

RK: Correct.

CM: And this is their interest.

RK: Or a related field.

CM: That's really great. I haven't heard of any other district in the state that has anything similar. Do you know?

RK: No. I'm not aware of it.

CM: That's really great, Rudy.

RK: Another big thing in terms of support services that we've got going and that took about five years in the process to develop, at Montgomery Adult School, where Tom Teagle is the principal. He's collaborated with the Episcopal Community Services,

and they have a Head Start childcare program there. They have 160 kids. It was really a great opening ceremony that they had, where they invited Bob Filner, one of our congressmen; they invited Greg Cox, who is a former Sweetwater District teacher and who is currently on the county board of supervisors. The hundred-plus kids each have these little papier-mache chains that they linked together, and they came out and walked in a line. Of course, they stole the show on that opening day. I've got a picture that I love where there's this big grin on Greg Cox's face, and there's this little kid with his finger stuck up Greg's nose. (both laugh)

CM: Yes. That's a picture to treasure. (both laugh) Now, this Head Start center is on the adult school campus then?

RK: Yes, it is. And the adult school students have a priority in getting childcare services for their kids.

CM: What about the other campuses? Do they have any kind of childcare or baby-sitting? There's a slight difference.

RK: Through the CBET (Community Based English Tutoring) program. It's kind of hit-and-miss in the other locations throughout the community. Once again, that's a very important – I guess you could say vital – service, but one that's not funded, that you really have to get creative about your funding to be able to provide it.

CM: I know in my district we used the Senior Employment Program to staff, really, a baby-sitting room. Then the mothers would come from class on a rotating basis to help.

RK: At this particular center, the buildings were – it's on district property. In fact, what happened there at Montgomery Adult School is that they had this huge parking lot for

the high school, and it sat vacant for twenty years. We started pulling in relocatables here and there, and in about a two-year period, we went from a vacant lot there to an adult school with six or seven classes, and right adjacent to it is this childcare center with another six classrooms staffed by the Head Start program with a teacher and teacher's aide in each of those classrooms. There's even an infant care room within it. It's really a class operation.

CM: That's very good. Of your main counselors, you said they were mainly with the academics. Do your vocational programs have counselors?

RK: No. Our adult school counselors, who are primarily academic counselors, of course can assist students in referring them to our vocational programs. But contained with the structure, we do not have that going on distinctively.

CM: Let's move on to vocational programs, Rudy. Why don't you kind of give an overview of what you have? I believe you have some cooperative arrangements in your vocational programs as well.

RK: Right. Our vocational programs represent about a quarter of our ADA. We have a range of vocational programs from hand skill type classes, auto body painting and repair as an example, to high tech classes, including local area network technology, a Cisco Academy that had the highest passage rate in the world, and a variety of computer applications type courses. We also have arrangements with a couple of the trade unions where we have apprenticeship classes at Montgomery Adult School as well.

CM: Did I read somewhere that you actually had a computer repair program?

RK: That's an interesting program.

CM: I mean, that sounds pretty advanced to me.

RK: Well, we have a computer repair program, but even better than that, we have a collaboration with the County of San Diego, the Futures Foundation, and National City Adult School where, when the county surplussed some computers, they donated them to the Futures Foundation, who is kind of like a broker type of an agency. We got computers into our computer repair program. The students upgraded the programs. Microsoft contributed software that we could upgrade the computers with. Then these were used in our family computer literacy program, where students who completed that program, upon completion, got a computer, an upgraded computer that was in good shape, up-to-date technology. And they got a year's worth of Internet service.

CM: That's wonderful.

RK: Oh, it is. This is in National City, which has one of the lowest per capita incomes in California and in the United States. It's a true example of this concept of bridging the digital divide.

CM: My guess is, knowing her interest in the field, that Lynne Robinson (former principal of National City Adult School) was very active in getting all of that set up.

RK: She was the one that spearheaded all that. As a result of her leadership in that area, two or three things happened. One is that her school got a collaborative award from an association of cities and schools, statewide collaborative award for that program. They also had a visit from then President Clinton's technology task force, who actually wrote up what they were doing. Then piggybacking on top of that, a local

legislator, California Assemblyman Juan Vargas, also nominated them for a technology award.

CM: That's great.

RK: That was one of many of Lynne's fortes and a true love of hers, and what a benefit to the community that has been.

CM: You have an active cooperative arrangement with your local community college, and I believe that's mostly in vocational areas, isn't it?

RK: That's correct.

CM: Tell us a little bit about that.

RK: We have what's called a 2 + 2 articulation program with Southwestern Community College. What that means is that there are courses that have been identified in the neighborhood of, I think, about twenty or so that students can complete, and the college will recognize it for college credit. Those include things like accounting, medical office procedures, Microsoft, Excel, Power Point, A+ Certification, Routing, the Cisco Network Academy, many of those kinds of classes and programs.

CM: And they get actual college credit, or do they just recognize that –

RK: They can get actual college credit.

CM: There's special state legislation then that allows that. Is that correct?

RK: Correct. While we're talking about that 2 + 2 program, it might be a good time to talk about the connection that we have with Southwestern [Community] College. The Sweetwater District as a whole has a council of administrators, where the principals and some cabinet-level administrators are represented on the council, along with Southwestern College administrators. They have a number of task groups working on

different types of things. It might be on the CAHSEE (California High School Exit Exam), or it might be on the transfer of students from the high school on to the community college.

One of those groups is Workforce Preparation and Lifelong Learning Task Group. The adult school principals and I are on that work group. There's one of the comprehensive high school principals and the continuation school principal from the Sweetwater District side of it; from Southwestern College is their dean, who is in charge of their non-credit program.

Among the things that we do is we talk about new programs that we're going to start up – we don't have any conflict – so that we're supplementing each other and not competing. We've done a real decent job of doing that. Most recently, we're developing – or have developed – an index of all the vocational programs offered by the community college, by the adult education program, by the regional occupational program, and School to Career (a state vocational educational initiative). What we will work toward, or eventually have, is a much better integrated system, where students can progress through our courses and then go on to the community college credit courses and start building skills for a career.

CM: And that kind of collaboration is really helpful for everyone involved, working together rather than a lot of turf wars. In your vocational programs, Rudy, do you have any placement workers or – like in the 2 + 2 program, does the community college work with placement? What can you tell me about placement?

RK: Placement. I sure would love to be able to get some of the Workforce Investment Act individualized training account money to help us with placement. We, rather than

improving our placement services over the past couple of years, have actually lost some staff in that regard. Under the previous federal job training act, the Job Training Partnership Act, JTPA, we had several staff, including four job developers, case management-type people. All of that was soft money. All of that was funded through the federal job training act. We get no additional funding for job placement services through the state, so those services have disappeared over the last couple of years. We do work with the South County Career Center, which is the One Stop career center, part of the Workforce Investment Act. But even their funding for placement services has been reduced from what it was under JTPA.

That said, we still do a decent job of getting people prepared for jobs, and we do a fair amount of follow up to ensure that we're doing that. Not as much as we would like to do or we could do. Quoting from our VTEA (Vocational and Technical Education Act), Carl Perkins, annual report, we had, it looks like, about 4,100 completers of programs last year, vocational programs. And last year we had close to 3,200 that got a job or retained a job or got a promotion as a result of the courses that they took with us.

CM: That's good. I imagine that even though you've lost a lot of your specific job placement personnel that if you've had these programs for a number of years that certainly local employers are aware of what you're doing and make contact with the school and recruit from the school and that kind of thing.

RK: Also, our teachers have those contacts, so what realistically happens, our teachers hear of jobs, and they refer our students to those jobs. That's one form of placement service, but surely not the one that we would want to solely rely on.

CM: Sure. I understand. Rudy, before we move on to student recognition activities, why don't you give us just kind of a summary? We've talked about your major programs, the academic programs and your vocational programs. Why don't you kind of give us a summary of the results of those big three programs?

RK: Let me give you a summary in terms of what our students have accomplished. Last year, the year 2002-2003, we had 241 students that got an adult school high school diploma. We had close to 800 that got the GED equivalency certificate. In fact, at our graduation ceremony, we had between 400 and 500 students that were recognized on that evening. We had close to 400 that achieved the skills that they needed to pass the citizenship test, and were able to document that 120 actually registered or voted for the first time. Then in terms of getting a job, of course, we mentioned that we had close to 3,200 that either got a job or retained their job or got a promotion through our classes.

CM: Those are impressive numbers. You mentioned the diplomas and the GEDs. Have the increased requirements for a high school diploma – have you seen any kind of a shift toward the GED because of these increased requirements, or are those numbers remaining relatively the same?

RK: That's interesting. With us, they're relatively constant. We had an increase in GED completers last year before the new test deadline. But one of the things that we've done is that we have increased our focus on our basic education classes. Consequently, after doing that, we've been increasing our numbers in our high school diploma program as well. That's been a really important thing, especially at San Ysidro Adult School where we first started that. We doubled our basic education

faculty. Not only are we getting more students in our high school diploma program, but they're better prepared, as well, as a result of that.

We've got the CAHSEE to look forward to. That's going to have an impact on our high school diploma program. The magnitude of that impact, we don't know yet what it's going to be because it has, of course, been postponed until 2006. However, the last time that we had a major increase in our graduation requirements was, I'm thinking, about eight or ten years ago, where we went from thirty-two semester credits to forty-two semester credits from one year to the next, an increase of ten.

CM: That's a big increase in one year.

RK: We had a decline in our high school diploma program, but after the dust settled, within three years, we were back to the levels that we were at before. So the high school diploma itself is still a valuable piece of paper to have.

CM: Some people definitely want that, rather than the GED certificate.

RK: Oh, absolutely. From a counseling standpoint, what we tell people is that the high school diploma is better to have, and the reason that it's better to have is that it prepares you better. There's no substitute for the greater length of time that it takes to get the diploma.

CM: And doing the actual course work.

RK: Yes. Absolutely. That said, if a student has an urgent goal, that is, "Hey, I've got a job offer if I have a GED," great. We're going to help you go after your goal. But bear in mind that some of the courses that you may take – math being a good example – it's the same number whether it's in a high school diploma program course or in a GED preparation course, and if you take that as part of the high school diploma

program, later on, you may want to come back and still get your regular diploma and be better prepared for college.

CM: I read in some of the materials about the district that of the students that *have* taken this exit exam, you're getting a fairly high pass rate, particularly on the English.

RK: Yes, we are.

CM: More so, I think, than the math.

RK: Well, we were not required to have our students take the California High School Exit Exam, but we wanted to find out if we were on the right rack. On a voluntary basis we did testing more as a pilot project than anything else because it wasn't the requirement yet for our students. But what we discovered was that we performed a little bit better than the high schools did in our district.

CM: That must have made the other principals happy.

RK: Well, no, no. It's not a we or they situation. In fact, many of the students that we have come through the system, so we don't want to claim all the credit for that. However, of those students that had all of their high school credits through the adult education program, they performed even better, in particular in the area of English. I really attribute that to our ESL and Adult Basic Education programs that prepare them for the high school classes.

CM: That's very good.

[end tape one, side A; begin tape one, side B]

CM: This is tape one, side B of the Rudy Kastelic interview. Rudy, let's move on to some student recognition activities that are routinely held in your district. Let's start with the graduation ceremony.

RK: That, of course, is the big one. That's the culmination of the year, and it's a good one. I don't care where you go in the state, if you go to a high school graduation, it's a tearjerker. They are impressive ceremonies. In our case, we combine the four adult schools into one ceremony.

CM: One big ceremony.

RK: One big ceremony. And we hold it at Southwestern College. We get annually 400 or 500 students that receive a diploma or GED equivalency certificate. We combine the two, and we have a couple thousand people that witness it. We have, oh, generally three or four graduation speakers, and for the past five years, they have been outstanding.

CM: Do they represent the different schools or the different departments?

RK: They represent the different schools and then the GED program. I always get comments from board members, from friends that attend the graduations, from district administrators how impressive those graduations are and how they recognize that that experience to our adult school students has been so meaningful to them. So that's the big one, the annual graduation.

CM: Do your local TV stations come out for it?

RK: They do. We have had coverage. One of the interesting sidelights that we have from last year's is, there's a fellow that's known as the flag man. He provided for us flags representing every state of the union, so that when the graduates formed their line and

they walked to their seats, they walked through this row of flags, and it was really impressive. At any rate, the big thing is the annual graduation.

In conjunction with that, each of the adult schools also has an awards ceremony. They do it in different ways. Generally, they're held during the daytime. Occasionally, they're held during the evening. At that time, they're recognized for things like grade point average. Anybody who has a B or above grade point average is recognized. There's a variety of scholarships that are awarded. Last year we had about $8,000 worth of scholarships that were awarded to our students.

CM: Districtwide.

RK: Districtwide, Yes. Those that have the high grade point average receive a medal that they get to wear with their cap and gown, and they are cap and gown affairs. We invite all kinds of dignitaries from the cities and county and district to witness those events.

Beyond that, on a daily basis, for example, Chula Vista Adult School has the Daily Principal's Award where a student is voted on by their classroom and recognized for the work that they're doing.

CM: A daily award. That's really neat.

RK: A daily award. Over the PA system and everything. We have a variety of different kinds of recognitions that way. We have active student associations at three of the four adult schools, and they're recognized for their work by their fellow students as well.

CM: Yesterday Jaime showed me the newsletter that comes out that has just a paragraph about a half dozen or so students in each of their newsletters.

RK: Isn't that a nice one? Yes.

CM: I'm impressed with –

RK: National City Adult School? Each of them have newsletters like that.

CM: Tell me a little bit, Rudy, about your scholarships. Where do you get the money for your scholarships?

RK: One source is the California Council for Adult Education (CCAE) local chapters. They contribute to the scholarships. We have a couple of memorial scholarship funds. One of them is the Ed Hawken Scholarship. He was a former Director of Adult Education for the Sweetwater District and the man that actually hired me as an instructional assistant. We have a Dr. Mary Ann Wheeler Scholarship. Mary Ann was assistant principal at Montgomery Adult School, and her husband, who is owner of a local restaurant, contributes $500 to each of the adult schools for that scholarship. Then the sites, typically the faculty and staff will pitch in for a scholarship. And wherever else we can get them from.

CM: Anyplace you can scrounge it up.

RK: You bet. (both laugh)

CM: Why not? Do you have special ethnic celebrations at the schools, or are you so heavily Hispanic that it's not –

RK: Well, it's primarily Hispanic/Latino ethnic type celebrations, but whenever there's a potluck, you know, the Mexican food is wonderful, the Filipino food is wonderful. (both laugh)

CM: So the different national groups get recognized also. Okay.

RK: Of course.

CM: I think probably as in all adult schools.

RK: Absolutely.

CM: Rudy, Sweetwater has been recognized by a number of state and national awards. We'll include a complete list of those in the appendix of our book on this. But I'd like for you to highlight a couple of those for us right now.

RK: Well, the big one that we received was the U.S. Secretary of Education Award, where the Sweetwater Adult Education Program, the division was recognized among six outstanding programs in the nation. That's kind of hard to top.

CM: That is indeed an honor.

RK: We have, since that time, also received state awards as well. We had Program of Excellence for citizenship in 1997. We've got our fingers crossed that actually tomorrow we'll be recognized for another Program of Excellence award in our ESL program. We'll see if it turns out tomorrow. (It did.) We have a National Institute for Literacy award for our CalWORKs program, where we have welfare-to-work students working on their basic skills. We mentioned earlier the collaboration award from the Coalition of Cities, Counties, and Schools that National City Adult School got through Lynne Robinson's leadership. We also mentioned that National City Adult [School] received recognition by the president's task force.

I'd also like to talk about a couple of individuals, and one of them is Sandy Devereaux, who received an award in adult education, the National Teacher of the Year. That was just a couple of years ago.

CM: That was from the Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE).

RK: That's correct. Sandy came to us from the Grossmont School District, so we can't claim all of her skills were developed in Sweetwater, but she has been an outstanding contribution to our faculty since she came from Grossmont. And, of course, it's quite an honor to see Jaime Mercado get recognition for being an outstanding Adult Education Successful Learner.

CM: Yes. There is another kind of recognition that your district receives, and that's through the contributions that you make to our state's adult education programs. I know that's how I first came across personnel from Sweetwater. I've been working with Lynne Robinson since 1981 and Adriana Sanchez Aldana. I was on an adult education advisory committee with her in the mid-eighties and have kept in close contact with her since then. But you participate in a lot of these kind of state committees. Why don't you tell us a little bit about –

RK: Well, for one thing, we have a lot of representation with the professional organizations: California Council for Adult Education, for example. Don Dutton is president-elect for that organization. He's a teacher at Montgomery Adult School. The California Adult Education Administrators Association (CAEAA); I'm representing us on that board currently. The Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) - Tom Teagle, principal at Montgomery Adult School, is the Region 18 president. Now, an interesting thing there is that he's the first adult education administrator in our region to be the region president, and he's the first region president to be appointed for a second consecutive term. So we're very well represented in our professional organizations in adult education.

We have teachers that have participated in the development of the model standards: Michelle Behan and Judy Wurtz. We've got three CALPRO (California Professional Development) trainers. Michelle Behan was on the committee that developed the state technology plan for adult education. Currently, Linda Carlton is on loan to the Regional Resource Center for San Diego and Imperial Counties.

CM: You have a Regional Resource Center. Why don't you tell what that is.

RK: We had one located for many years at the Sweetwater District site. Right now, the physical location is at the San Diego County Office of Education. Actually, we pushed to bring that about. It's more centrally located for all of the adult education programs, since we're at the extreme southern end of the county. We collaborated with the San Diego County Office of Education, with the Sweetwater Adult Education Program, and with San Diego Community College District to pull off the funding for that. Of course, our teacher, Linda Carlton, is on the staff of the Regional Resource Center.

When or if the Select Committee on Adult Education, or the task force, whatever comes about from the Master Plan legislation – that's a little bit up in the air right now – whenever that becomes a formality, the California Council for Adult Education has already recommended Adriana Sanchez Saldana as a field rep to the advisory committee for whatever comes out of that.

CM: Now, you worked on that task force, didn't you?

RK: What I worked on was for the Master Plan itself. This is a task force that's advising for the implementation of the legislation of that plan. But the Master Plan, I believe it was 1999, I think – maybe it was a little bit later than that. Anyway, when the

framework for the Master Plan for Education in California, Kindergarten through University, was first published, it was a 26-page document. Adult education was first mentioned in the second to the last bullet on page 26 of that document. That was absurd. Adult educators from throughout the state started taking notice to that, started becoming involved. And to make a long story short, we went from the second to the last bullet on the 26th page of a 26-page document to having our own task force specifically designated for adult education and non-credit education. So we've come a long way.

Shortly after the framework came out and they started their committee work, I participated in a subgroup for adult education and non-credit education. That's the Master Plan. A few years before the Master Plan, about three years before that, was the Joint Board Task Force that came up with twelve recommendations for adult education in California, including things like improving access for students, and reciprocity in credentialing with adult education and non-credit education, and model standards, and other recommendations as well.

There was an advisory group to that task force that was developed of field administrators, and I was invited to participate in that group. I believe a lot of the work that was done in that Joint Board Task Force, we got that into the ultimate Master Plan for Adult Education.

CM: And you've had legislative representatives visit your school as a result of all this planning activity.

RK: We've had legislators and legislative staff that have visited locally, our local legislators and staff. But also, we've had people from the staff of the Master Plan

Committee itself that visited us. We had the staff who's designated for the Select Committee on Education, from Assemblywoman Carol Liu's office, visit our program. We've had quite a bit of contact with our local legislators, including Dede Alpert. It's her dream to come up with the Master Plan for Education in California. And Juan Vargas and Denise Ducheny. We've had good contacts with all of them.

CM: We have to keep reminding people that we're here and the kind of work that we do, and I think that you and your district have made major contributions to that. I think that this brief overview has shown that Sweetwater's reputation for quality programs is well deserved. Those certainly work to the benefit of your students. One of the beneficiaries of your supportive programs and staff was Jaime Mercado. You must have been delighted when he joined the adult division.

RK: Absolutely.

CM: When did you first meet him, and what was your relationship with him before he became one of your principals?

RK: I've known him indirectly for many years, participating at the district level at principals' meetings, and in that capacity. He is a recent addition to our adult education program. He's in his second year as a principal. Now, Jaime had a reputation among the principals in the district as being one of the outstanding principals, and that's among his colleagues. That's pretty tough to get that kind of recognition or respect.

He is a principled person. He doesn't take a job for the money, he takes a job for the work that he can do. He'd worked his way up to being a high school principal and was successful and surely would be considered for assistant superintendent or

area superintendent or superintendent in the district just about anywhere in California. But as a high school principal, he saw a need within our district for leadership at the continuation school, and he volunteered to be principal of Palomar Continuation High School.

CM: Those assignments are not easy.

RK: No. He didn't take it because it was easy. He took it because he felt it was important. And that's one thing that he's done for adult education as well. He comes to us with a wealth of administrative experience, but he also comes to us with experience as an adult school student. He got his high school diploma through Mar Vista Adult School, and, of course, is going to be recognized for that.

He takes great pride and pleasure in being a role model. He allows me, whenever I have a chance to bring that up in any kind of a public forum, that he's principal of National City Adult School, but he started out as an adult school student, he does not dissuade me from doing that. But he doesn't do it for the accolades for himself. He does it so that people can understand the contributions that our adult school students can make, given a chance.

CM: I did it; you can, too.

RK: You bet.

CM: Before he came to the division, did any of the adult schools use him as graduation speakers or anything like that?

RK: I'm not aware of *him*. We have used Jose Brocz, one of our high school principals, at our GED ceremonies. He got his high school equivalency certificate. I don't recall Jaime addressing a graduation, for example, at that point. I do want to say that Jaime,

for a few years, considered his move to adult education and, indeed, really had a desire to take that job. And he's doing outstanding with it.

CM: I was going to say he's only been with you a little over a year now, so it's hard to say what kind of contributions he has made in that short amount of time, but I'm sure he's made *some* during that time, if you would want to –

RK: Oh, absolutely. He, number one, brought an outside perspective. He's an insider as far as a former adult education student goes; he's an outsider in terms of bringing a different kind of a viewpoint from being a high school principal and a middle school principal. So when we have our principals' meetings, and we're looking at policy, or we're looking at standardization, or we're making decisions, he can always look at it from just a little bit of a different slant, and that's very valuable to have.

He's a very compassionate person. One of the things that he has done is to encourage adult school teachers to consider employment in the high schools and middle schools of our district. You may think that that's counter-productive. I mean, here are some good teachers that we may lose from adult education. But it was what was right for those individuals. He has identified people who are capable of the work, and, of course, they can go off and come back to us if they decide to come back to us. But that's recognition for adult school teachers as well, that they're able to succeed in the high schools of our district as well as the adult schools.

When it came time last year to make some pretty drastic cuts because of the funding crisis in the state, he was very compassionate and very creative and very collaborative with his teachers and discussed the reasons why and the approaches to

take. I had several teachers that came to me and told me that they appreciated the fairness and the compassionate approach that he took.

He also is taking on things like looking at standardizing certificates and revisions in curriculum in our vocational programs. He's the type of person that kind of analyzes things and then, if he thinks he's got a better idea, he'll come to our principal meetings and suggest it and quite often gets support from everybody else because they're such good ideas.

CM: You said that he allows you – that may not be the right word – but that he doesn't mind your using his life story as an example, from an adult school graduate to adult school principal. Does he talk to his students about that? I mean, are his students aware of what he's done?

RK: Yes. Certainly they are. In fact, I have a story from just a couple of weeks ago. One of our teachers, Steve Niemeyer, talked about how he had some students that weren't progressing as quickly as he thought that they should and told Jaime about that. Jaime will bring them in and sit them down and talk with them about that. He's not reticent at all to talk with students about their progress, encourage them, and use himself as an example.

CM: As I say, it's hard to find anyone that can match the story of from graduate to principal, but how else is he a role model besides his educational path?

RK: First of all, let me say he's not just a role model for students, but he's a role model for faculty as well, from the standpoint that he frequently tells the story about the relationship he had with his adult school teacher, Burke Mills, who influenced him to mend his ways and pay attention to his education and to accept personal

responsibility for his own education. The reason that I say he's a role model for teachers is, he tells them what an impact that had on him. So that's a real benefit from a faculty standpoint. Tell me again what you just asked.

CM: Well, just in terms of other than his educational path, how else was he a role model?

RK: He had not intended to get into education. Actually, he describes himself at the time that he was in college and just out of college as being a community activist, and indeed worked for the MAAC (Metropolitan Area Advisory Committee) project, which is a non-profit social service type agency. Then he decided to go to college and was not initially going to be getting into education. He tells the story about one of the professors from San Diego State saw him in a line and asked him what he was going to do and what he was going to get into and what his goals were, and said to him, "Well, you can speak Spanish, can't you?" And he said, "Yes." He said, "You ought to work toward a vocational degree." He wondered why, and he said, "Well, because in the area that you come from right now, they need people like you in that particular area." He parlayed that into not only vocational but into academics. So he kind of went from a community activist to an educator with a community activist bent on a mission to help students back in his community that he came from to get a rung up on the ladder.

CM: Other than Jaime, does the district have any other adult school alumni that are employed in the district?

RK: We have several that I know of and probably a few that I don't know of. Among those that I know of, one of our teachers at Montgomery Adult School, Teresa Matos, started with us as a GAIN (Greater Avenues to Independence, the former California

welfare reform initiative) or CalWORKs student. She hired on to be a classified employee with the GAIN program. She got her adult school teaching credential, and now she's teaching business education classes, very successful at it. And she's currently working on her administrative credential.

CM: So you're going to have another administrator.

RK: Absolutely. One of the secretaries for the Division of Adult Education, Georgina Buenrostro, is a graduate of what was then Mar Vista Adult School. Elba Soto, who is a clerk in our GED center is a graduate of the adult schools, as well as Maria Perman, who went on to be a teacher and a counselor in our adult education program, and Ray Cazares, who recently retired from the superior court in San Diego. In fact, Maria Perman was on the board of trustees for the Southwestern Community College District for about twelve years, and Ray Cazares got his GED through Sweetwater Adult School. That was in 1961. He went to San Diego State, went to Harvard Law School, was a municipal court judge, retired as a superior court judge, and was recently recognized by the Sweetwater District in the second group of alumni who were inducted into our district's Hall of Fame.

CM: Tell me about the district Hall of Fame.

RK: Well, indeed, annually a handful of people who have made a variety of contributions in academics, in entertainment, in sports, in government service are recognized. Like we're having our Successful Adult Learners effort in the state, the Sweetwater District does a similar type thing at the district level for alumni. Among those who have been recognized is another former student of Burke Mills. First of all, she's an officer in

the United States Navy and a physician and was the physician to President Clinton. I'm sure Burke must have told you the story about that.

CM: Yes, he did. Yes. So among the district Hall of Fame, then, are some adult school graduates, as well as –

RK: Ray Cazares is, and I'm sure in the future there will be others.

CM: Yes. I'm sure there will be, too. Now, not everyone is a Jaime Mercado, although you've certainly given me a list of people who went through your adult school system that are now back in the district. Do you have some other ways that returning students can help motivate your current students? Just as an example, Rudy, a lot of times people have gone through citizenship class and, after they've gone through the exam and naturalization, come back to talk to the class.

RK: Certainly the opportunity is there. I'm aware, in particular in recent years, of students from the military who have come back from Iraq. For example, Montgomery Adult School had a recent Patriots Day ceremony, where, although it wasn't one of our former adult school students, it was the sister of one of our adult school employees that was able to pull out a few tears at the flag raising ceremony on Patriot Day this last September the 11th. Those are more done on an individual class-by-class basis, but now that we've talked, it gives me some ideas about something to do in the future.

CM: Yes. I want to go back just a little bit because something you said reminded me of it, and I forgot to mention it when you were talking about that Jaime can bring to the principals' meetings things that are done throughout the district.

RK: A little different perspective.

CM: I know that he was telling me about the free medical clinic that he set up at Palomar and that he's trying to do that at National City now. I just wanted to comment. I think things like that are great, and they're good matches for adult schools.

RK: Actually, what he did was, he was the district administrator for the homeless programs, and he continued to do that as an administrator in the adult education program. What happened there is that, in addition to considering the kids of our district, now because he's in adult education, he can also consider the adults in our district.

CM: So you actually have an administrator that's kind of designated to work with the different homeless programs.

RK: Correct.

CM: Again, I think that's just great. Rudy, we're about to wind up here. Are there other school practices or incidents that we should talk about before we bring this to a close?

RK: I think, in general, one of the strengths of our adult education program in Sweetwater is that we really look at it from a division-wide perspective, where we cooperate with each other, where we're not trying to compete and, at the forefront, consider ourselves solely for resources. We really look at it from a division-wide perspective. There's give and take. For example, with the Perkins money, we try to make sure that everybody gets a little bit of something out of that on an annual basis, but we also try to plan ahead and put money into a new program or into a community that's in real need of a program rather than just make sure that everything is equal. But that takes collaboration, and it takes cooperation.

Another strength of our program is our support staff. Our resource teachers are indispensable. They really are supportive in terms of new teachers coming on and assisting them with techniques and answering questions that they may have. I consider that a very valuable aspect of our program.

We talked earlier about our counseling services that are very important in that we do well in the Sweetwater District because we've put an emphasis on that.

We really, all of us, faculty, staff, and administration, worked together last year on our finances, and in a year's time really did a fantastic job of balancing the budget. The best part about that is that I can honestly say that the people who noticed the cuts that we made the least were the students.

CM: That's the way it should be.

RK: I don't think there are very many that would even be able to tell you that they were aware that it was going on. So, thanks to people like Jaime and all of our faculty and staff. I really appreciate the work that they're doing.

CM: Rudy, I skipped over something else I want to ask you about. We went through some of your graduates that had returned to work for the district, but you had mentioned a couple of other successful adult school graduates that are out and about in the world.

RK: Yes. I think we talked about Ray Cazares, the superior court judge, and Maria Perman, the member of the board of trustees for Southwestern.

CM: Okay. They all got rolled into one. You mentioned something about a governor from Baja California.

RK: When I was a counselor many, many, many years ago at Sweetwater Adult School, I was told that a former student of Sweetwater Adult School was one of the former governors of Baja California Del Sur.

CM: Someone that had taken advantage of education across the border.

RK: Actually, Jaime, just the other day, told me that that individual lived in San Ysidro.

CM: Okay. That's fine. Okay. I want to thank you, Rudy, both for the interview and for the contributions that you and Sweetwater's adult schools have made and continue to make to California's adult education programs.

RK: It's an honor to be asked to do this, and the reason that it is is because of the good work that adult education does. I would like to do anything that I can to help.

CM: Good. This interview is a part of the Adult Education Students Succeed Initiative of the California Adult Education Oral History Project.

END OF INTERVIEW

California Department of Education
Adult Education Oral History Project

Adult Education Students Succeed

Burke Mills

Sweetwater Union High School District
Division of Adult and Continuing Education
1962 - 1977

Instructor, Mar Vista Adult School

Sweetwater Union High School District
1960 - 1994

Instructor, Mar Vista High School

September 23, 2003
San Diego, California

By Cuba Z. Miller

PROJECT: Adult Education Students Succeed
California Adult Education Oral History Project

INTERVIEWEE: Burke Mills

INTERVIEWER: Cuba Miller

DATE: September 23, 2003

CM: This is Cuba Miller interviewing Burke Mills in San Diego, California, on September 23, 2003. Mr. Mills is a lifelong teacher now retired from Sweetwater Union High School District. The purpose of the interview is to record his memories of and relationship with former student Jaime Mercado. The interview is a part of the Adult Education Students Succeed Project.

Let's start with some personal information about you. Tell us just a little bit about your family and your growing up and your educational background.

BM: I was born in San Francisco, California, into an Irish Catholic family, and we were raised in Marin County as youngsters. I have three sisters who are all younger than me. During the Depression, 1935-36, our family split up. My father left us, and my mother had four children to take care of. She was a very bright woman. She decided to go into the Catholic school uniform business. She started out that way and was very successful in it. Most of us had to go away to boarding schools because she was always running a business. I went to a Jesuit high school in San Jose called Ballarmine.

CM: Yes. It's a very famous school up there.

BM: I figure probably better than my collegiate activities was going to school at Ballarmine. The priests were good, and so forth. After graduating from high school, I came back to San Francisco to work with my mother. It was one of those family things that didn't work out too well, so I went into the service, first the air force and then into the navy.

In the navy, I married a navy officer, an ensign in the navy, and we had two children, who are now – one is forty-nine and the other is forty-seven. He's an attorney and the girl's an RN. Then I got divorced, part of the American scene. Then married again too quickly, but all right. I had two more children. One is now in the air force, an intelligence man, and the other is at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I had a girl and a boy. I have two boys and two girls.

CM: Okay. That's nice.

BM: Okay. Now go back in history. I had two great-grandfathers. One was a division commander of the Southern Railway in Virginia and Tennessee, and the other was in the federal court system in San Francisco. He influenced my life until age eight, when he was killed by a drunk driver in Carmel, California. But he left us with ideas. We always talked philosophy and certain things. He left us the idea you've got to get educated, because he'd come out of the tough Irish times when everybody had to work in some way or another. It was a funny family. They were dysfunctional at times and cold, and the warmth would come from, say, the grandfathers or other relatives.

CM: They were very supportive.

BM: Very supportive. After the service, I went to Sacramento State College and graduated

with a degree in history and English. I had met Mary Lynn Deddeh, who was married to Waddie Deddeh, and she was teaching in Sacramento at that time. She said, "Why don't you come down to the Sweetwater District and interview?" I came down with a couple of other friends of mine, and we were interviewed by Mr. Harry German. He offered us a job in this district, and I took it, teaching English. At that time, I also taught driver training. Someone said, "Why don't you go in the adult school at night? You'd be good at it. You're very good at literature, and so forth." So I started teaching under Bob Randal, who was an adult school principal at Mar Vista.

CM: Let's back up just a bit. Why did you decide to become a teacher?

BM: I became a teacher because that was my heaven, reading and things like that. Sometimes I was known as a smartass kid by other kids because I always was looking – I was probably the brightest kid in the class at the time. And being made fun of, and being from a single home during the thirties, kids tease you about becoming a divorce counselor. I worked my energy into reading or stealing magazines out of offices just to see what the world was like. I was not a great athlete or anything. I was just a good reader, and I could synthesize what was there. I probably was the outcast of Poker Flats. (both laugh)

I liked the service, too. I liked the bureaucracy that focuses on doing something for the country, whether it's defense or educating the youth. Someone said to me, "Can you name three people in your life who really influenced it?" I said, "Yes, and they're all teachers." President Bush doesn't do it, or these people that look up to all these big heroes. He said, "If you really look at the people closest to you, they are teachers." I went into [teaching] journalism, which even made it better,

because then you really have to see what a kid is like, see what he can put on the paper and send out to all the other eight or nine hundred kids in that school so they can communicate with them.

There's a lot of pleasure in that, a lot of pleasure working with youth, because I think you carry it into your old age, that you just don't get old, you just want to still teach people. They keep you young.

CM: They keep you young.

BM: I'm almost seventy-four years old, and nobody believes it, because I run around with young people. But I had the germ to teach and lead, do things like that.

CM: You said you came down to Sweetwater from Sacramento, so you've been with Sweetwater your entire teaching career. Did you pretty much stay at the same school?

BM: Yes, I did. I loved that school.

CM: But you had a number of different assignments in that school.

BM: Yes. Yearbook, newspaper, English. I taught a core gifted program, which was just the opposite from adult school program but the same pathways. They were both individual, in a way. The gifted kids would go off on different projects that would be close to them, where the other kids in the adult school, they were out to get a diploma, so they had to have some kind of teamwork getting through all their courses of English and history, and so forth. I used the same kind of approach. I let the teams sit together and do their work, and there would be no competitiveness. There would be harmony in the group.

CM: You were ahead of your time in using group work back then.

BM: I had a couple of scholarships, like to Seaton Hall, and I went to New York for some kind of training. They were always talking about Summerhill in England and different programs that allow people to grab hold of their lives, maybe take a year off from school and then come back.

I just heard Jaime say something in the car coming down here. Someone called about registering a student, but they didn't have certain papers. Jaime said, "Ignore the fact. Just register them and we'll take care of it when I get back. We'll just get the kid in school." He'd been out three years. I've seen a lot of people that way, like Jaime. You see people, for some reason, someone's burned them the wrong way, and I've seen teachers who do that.

CM: Yes. We all have.

BM: And subsequently, if they don't have some kind of pathway to motivate them or to get self-esteem, they're going to have a tough life. I've had a lot out of adult school, because I met a lot of those kids that weren't making it, but they turned around and could make it in adult school.

CM: Who got you started in adult school? How did you get there?

BM: Actually, they came after me, the adult school principal. I sort of had it pretty good in my energetic days a long time ago. I gave it twelve, fifteen hours ever day. I mean, I was there before school and lunchtime and after school, and if kids needed – they'd learn topic sentence writing or subordinate clauses or certain things to do. Instead of taking negative answers, I said, "Let's turn in your, quote, stream of consciousness. Whatever you want to write, just do it. You can get some credit some way or another." We don't have run like Voltaire and be chained to certain kind of programs.

Actually, it was a pleasure for me doing that. I did two jobs, the day job and then the adult school for years.

CM: Did you say – Ed Randal, is that who you said –

BM: Bob Randal. I'm sure he's known around – I don't even know if he's still with us.

CM: So he came after you, then.

BM: He had so many teachers that would just open the door and, "Here." He said he wanted something different. He wanted some flamboyancy, and he wanted someone to talk to them. And I did. I lectured. They had to do the paperwork and the books, but sometimes I'd waive one for the other if they'd just listen to the lecture and what we're going to talk about, because there's a lot of underlining facets of literature that you just don't understand when you're reading a book. It could be the social conditions we live in or the sterility of the society or war hawks, whatever we are. I'd give the idea that you can do critical thinking and discuss something with someone without being shot down. We're a nation of too many people shooting other people down for their opinions and not allowing – I said, "Even with your parents, you have to learn that some of these people are so juvenile, even if they're forty years old. If you don't believe it their way, they act like Ku Klux Klan members or something." I said, "Just try to broaden your scope and you'll end up with a happier life."

CM: Other than the fact that it's quite obvious that you enjoy working with your students –

BM: I miss it terribly.

CM: What did you particularly like about working in the adult school?

BM: The choice that they could be there if they wanted to be, instead of the day school, they *had* to be there.

CM: Makes a real difference, doesn't it?

BM: Yes. But I tried to give the same message to them, "You have to be here, but not with the idea that I'm going to have the hammer and sickle on top of you to do it." Why is it that after a while, they find out – I say, "Go out and look at the job market. Do you want to dish wash all your life, something like that?" I don't like to make those comments because there have to be a lot of dishwashers, there have to be people to do it. I mean, the directions getting to your room was a problem. We ran into four people, and they all went like this (pointing). I said, "We don't know this hotel." Jaime's pretty good about knowing where he is if we got lost.

It is a love. You don't work, teaching. You're in love and you're getting ideas, and you're getting people to absorb your ideas and come back. What I like about being a teacher, I can't go anyplace without someone saying, "Hi, Mr. Mills." All the years I've been there where I live, I've never been threatened by one, never had a problem, never had a disciplinary problem. I would go to their level and say, "Why are we getting so angry with each other?" Or, "What's happened?"

CM: That seeing people on the street is always interesting because the faces look familiar and it's hard to come up with the names.

BM: It takes me half a block, or it might be the next day, and I'm getting worried about it. I had a terrible accident. I fell and hit my head, and I just said, "Watch it carefully." I sub still once in a while, and it's a pleasure to go back in the learning center.

CM: You do still substitute then.

BM: Yes. Rarely. They tell me to slow down.

CM: You've kind of touched on this. Maybe you want to clarify it just a little bit.

Certainly, adult education is different things to different people.

BM: To me, it's mandatory. Mandatory that they have it.

CM: Lifelong learning.

BM: I couldn't get the lady off the phone today from Kaiser. She said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, I'm thinking about what's happening to these kids. They lose their medical insurance at eighteen, and they need a year off to just gather a new life, to find out what the next step in life is." She said, "You know, that's true." She said, "Why is that?" "Because no one does a damn thing about it. There's not enough clout to say someone's got to save these kids." I don't see any politician doing it.

CM: Theoretically, our new state superintendent has some experience with adult ed, but it's not a good year for someone to get started, as far as money is concerned.

BM: It's sad what happened. With all these teachers and all their funds and no money to put away. That's a different subject.

CM: When I was speaking to you earlier, you mentioned Ed Spies. Why don't you tell us about him and the influence that he had on your work in adult ed.

BM: Ed Spies came to Mar Vista in – I don't know what year, but he came as an assistant principal. It was just something about the man. He handled discipline very well. I noticed him on the schoolyards, or the courtyards, if there was a fight or something like that, he had a way of breaking them up and lessen the tendency to be threatening or ditching school. He was a hooky cop before he came there. I don't know what they call them.

CM: Attendance officers.

BM: Attendance officers. He just had a way of going out and bringing kids back. He

asked me one day, "Why don't we start a program – " And he called it GAS Stop (Gives Students a Chance to Pass) or something, get achieving talent into the student. We had some kind of acronym. We had a class of about forty or fifty people, and we just would dig up work. He worked with me on it. And these kids could pass courses and go on.

CM: That was in the high school.

BM: That was in the high school. And then we did channel people out to the adult school. What we were trying to do was get these kids through school to get diplomas, instead of running away and running to some prison. We wanted to see if they could get out and have some skill in computation and everything. We focused on writing more than anything else, if they could write stories or paragraphs about the subjects they were learning. We basically taught English and history in this program.

Ed, he was just a charmer. He would get me books. You need some paperbacks? You need paper? He'd get it for us. And he'd come in all the time and just pat a kid on the head or something and say, "You need this." Some are really tough kids to deal with. With that program, we ran it several years, and it seemed to do the job.

CM: Did he ever go directly to adult ed?

BM: Yes, he did. After Mar Vista he went to – no. He went to another school as assistant principal, and then he went to adult ed. Are you familiar with Montgomery Adult School?

CM: I know that it's one of the schools in the Sweetwater District, Yes.

BM: Well, he became principal up there, and he ran the adult education program up there.

I think he's retired now. Before he retired, he did special handling cases, special projects, and so forth. Very, very talented man. You've got to meet him some day.

CM: Well, maybe I can.

BM: If you can locate him. I can find him. Jaime can find him in that retired teachers manual.

CM: Sure. What was the adult high school diploma program like when you started in the early sixties?

BM: Mr. Randal was very good. Mr. Randal had been a former teacher in Kansas or Nebraska, someplace in the Midwest, and he had that droll sense of just wanting to see that the schools ran like Topeka, Kansas. I liked his attitude. There was no domineering factor over the teachers. He just wanted teachers to – he had good math teachers, good English teachers, and he ran it like a day school.

CM: Separate classes –

BM: It was at night, but separate classes. He wanted that feeling that this was a school; whereas, some places it's all independent learning, or they're not connected to the school. Bob Randal was a man that said, "This is Mar Vista Adult School, and we're going to leave it that way." It didn't get buried in the day school.

CM: You had separate classes in the diploma program then, and yet it was possible for people to kind of speed up their work.

BM: Yes.

CM: How did you manage that?

BM: Well, I had an afternoon class, and that's how I got Jaime. A bunch of Jaime's friends, they needed civics and English, and so forth, to graduate. You could see how

talented Jaime is. The big thing we had to have was motivation to get them through school. We had this afternoon class, and these boys would come, and a few girls. Then we'd just speed it up as fast as we could to get them out of there. Subsequently, the ones I ever saw, they grabbed on to it and thanked me for it. Otherwise – I remember the one girl vividly that I didn't get to. She couldn't pass the competency test, and my God, we must have taken it hundreds of times and just couldn't pass it, and finally got mad one day, just angry. She said, "Well, you didn't do anything for me." And I didn't, actually. I kept thinking what a challenge it is to get someone to pass that writing sample. That's the way it goes.

CM: Did she eventually get it?

BM: No, she didn't. And if I run into her, she's not going to let me forget it.

CM: Okay. So they were single classes, but you worked –

BM: Yes. Well, I had English and history together.

CM: You worked at whatever speed the students could handle.

BM: In those days, we had a lot of workbooks. Mr. Randal was the kind of guy with the idea we can't live on the workbooks, we have to live on your own personal backgrounds. Because the kids know what's in the book already, but they don't know how utilitarian you can be as an adult. Remember, these are all sixteen, seventeen, eighteen year old kids, and they hear from their parents every day, "You gotta be out of here at eighteen." They get a lot of negative stuff from a lot of people, even teachers, a lot of negative stuff. "You can't do this work. Why bother? Just take off." It used to hurt me because that could have been me. I came from a broken, dysfunctional Irish family. I could have run away from life.

CM: You hear a lot of stories like that where people will say this is the direction you're going, why bother with this?

BM: I remember those counselors had – every fifth child would be in some kind of jail in California. Prison, I mean. I used to see San Quentin every day, as you do if you look out your window. I'd see San Quentin and think, "Oh, God, I'm glad I'm here and not there." And it's sad. We have something like thirty-six of those prisons in California.

CM: And still building. Were there counselors available to the adult school students, or did the teachers do most of the . . . .?

BM: The teachers did most of it. There was one guy for like two periods or so, who would come in. Actually, Bob Randal did most of it. He would interview them. He had a secretary that did all the paperwork. So it did have the function of a regular school. It had a principal and a secretary.

CM: About how large was the Mar Vista Adult School when you were working in it?

BM: I'd say three or four hundred people. There were two rows of buildings going every night, except Fridays. I guess we didn't work on Fridays.

CM: How long did you work in adult ed?

BM: Probably ten, fifteen years. I taught thirty-five and probably did it for the first fifteen years, or so.

CM: Okay. So it was early in your career, then, that you worked with adult ed.

BM: Early, Yes.

CM: Jaime Mercado describes you, as you know, as his mentor and credits you with providing him the encouragement and direction that he needed to finish high school

and continue his education. What do you remember about your first contacts with him, and what was he like at the time?

BM: First of all, I had the reputation of probably a pretty tough guy, other people said. First of all, we were going to set this class up, and they were saying that most of these guys didn't like school or didn't want to be there or had some run-in with some teacher. Something confronted them that stopped their education in some way. But my first day with these boys walking in, they were just true gentlemen. Maybe it was because of my demeanor at the time, just a pair of Levis on and a shirt. I'd just sit down and say, "You're all going to get through this class one way or another. Physically or mentally, we're going to get through this class." I used to take them over to my house and show them books, and so forth.

CM: Your whole class?

BM: Yes. We'd just meet over there and have meetings. I had a library out in my garage and stuff. I wanted them sometimes to have the feeling that we didn't always have to be in school. We could sit outside by the rocks and just enjoy it. I could see that every one of these kids was talented. They were timely-type people. They would fit in with the times and enjoy it. And they had – I thought the biggest thing was tenacity. They just were a very tenacious group of boys. They were all seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. And the girls the same way. It's like Saturday Night Fever. My first opinion was good.

They gave me the same kind of encouragement, too. They liked the idea that they were going to get a grade, and they were going to pass, and they were going to get a diploma, and they were going to go on with their lives. And if they hadn't gone

into this program, they may be – I don't think I want to say cleaning the rooms downstairs, but – because they have to be good, too. Once someone has the idea they can focus on their on self-esteem, because they had to do that. I taught driver training for a number of years. It used to amaze me. I'd pick up these kids at school and say, "Let's drive up to Coronado." They'd say, "We've never been there."

CM: That's frightening, isn't it?

BM: If you walk to a classroom here in this hotel, in that lobby down there, and you see what you see, these kids are turning – they're scared. They see these old people look like me, and they sit there. What we had to overcome is the idea – this group of mine with Jaime in it – overcome the idea you can transcend all this and make your own place in life. It's the only thing you have, because you're going to get married some day, or something, and you have to have a good lifestyle to live by.

That's basically what impressed me about Jaime. Jaime had that moxie. The other people were sort of affected by him. They had the same thing, had some nice attitudes.

CM: So, he was a leader. Even as a student, he was a leader.

BM: Yes, he was a leader. Good-looking boy. Nice. He had a lot of class, like he does now. There's a lot of class in Jaime. I'm sure he's had his confrontations with different administrators, and so forth. I like his civility and liberal attitudes about things, not hardcore.

CM: Were you aware at the time of the influence that you were having on him? Can you kind of read that?

BM: I think I was well liked singly by him and others, Yes. It was teamwork-type

learning. You have these boys, and they'd work together on their English or math or social studies. The proudest thing I am of all of them, they graduated. Then they went on to become something, which tells me – I don't care where you go to school, if you can leave at eighteen and have something with you, you can do well. My son passed the bar the first time, and I know friends of his took five times to pass the bar.

CM: Which is common.

BM: Test taking was a problem for a lot of these kids, so sometimes we had to just change the program to see that they could garner a lot of information about the subject.

CM: There's also the skill of taking tests that sometimes has to be taught.

BM: If they threw out adult education, this society would be the biggest loser in the world. There's just something about it. I hear more kids out where I live – I walk the beach, four miles a day, and I run into kids twenty-three, twenty-four, who have been dropped out of school. They get jobs like carpet cleaners, and they work for three days and get fired because they haven't got the affirmation or ability to get along with people. You can't afford a bad temper in this society, and a lot of them get angry. I find adult school can lessen that anger by just giving them the tools to go to the Department of Human Resources and get jobs.

CM: I'm getting a picture of you, Mr. Mills, as kind of a pied piper. You go out walking on the beach and gather young people around.

BM: They know me. I've been retired nine years, but there are people thirty years old who say – they mention me in different articles, and so forth.

CM: Once Jaime got his high school diploma, I know he went on first to the community college and then to San Diego State. Did he stay in touch with you through his

college years?

BM: On and off. On and off he'd come by. When he became principal, we went back and remembered a lot of stuff we had done before. But we've always – in the nearby area, if I'd see him, I'd wave. He had the nice demeanor about letting you know that he was still around.

CM: That's what I wondered, if he just kind of kept in touch without hovering.

BM: He's very polite, a very polite man. And as I say, he had the demeanor of just touching hands with everybody. I think that's the success in adult school. They picked the right guy to run an adult school program.

CM: Okay. You taught at Mar Vista, and that was the school that Jaime was attending when he dropped out of school. He actually was out for a while before he came back.

BM: A year or two, I think. He got a job at Rohr or someplace. Did a couple of jobs. Then he went in the army.

CM: When he came back to Mar Vista as a principal, you were still there.

BM: Yes.

CM: What was your reaction to that and the reaction of other members on the faculty?

BM: My reaction was, a very competent man to be a principal. Some other people, they questioned it, but they would question whether the moon's going the right way or not. That didn't bother me. His faculty meetings were superb, very professional. He let a lot of stuff go to groups so they could figure out how to set up a program, or scheduling, or some conflict. Jaime always allowed the teachers involved to feed into it, and he'd give the final okay. He was very good at that, because you do have cliques. It's a sorry part of history, but Jaime handled it very well. He never put

anybody down. He just had a good grasp of how to lead people.

CM: From what you've said about him, I doubt that – you weren't particularly surprised that he ended up being a principal, then.

BM: No, no. I could see the leadership a long time ago. He's just a nice man. Nice men lead well.

CM: Did it create any kind of a buzz among the staff, among the faculty, when he came back to the same school?

BM: Oh, there'd be some lighthearted joking and things, peer jealousy or envy, I would say, more than anything else. I think it's a very great thing when someone does become a principal, takes all those administrative courses they have to take. The psychological aspect of it, leading people and keeping parents off your back and the politicians. You're a man of all seasons. That's what Jaime is, a man of all seasons. He can fit any – he can be here in Levis and Levi shirt or a suit. But he was very good for the school.

Actually, when I think back, of all the principals I've had, Jaime's the best. He probably had – I don't know what you want to call it – the toughest road to hoe to get there, where all these others would come from upper middle-class families and had already been taught to be a principal. Jaime had to come in through the back door. The adult school is another program. It's not the front door. It's the back door to what *will* become the front door, because society has to go that way.

CM: It's the connecting door.

BM: Well, we've got the junior colleges, and they're having their problems. But there's got to be something in the interim to prepare them to go to college. A lot of these people

call these city colleges a high school with ashtrays, or they make some kind of –

CM: Or whatever, Yes. I would think, though – you say you weren't surprised because he had shown leadership abilities even when he was young, but I would think that his achievements would give you some sense of affirmation about the work you've done.

BM: Oh, yes, definitely. I've saved a lot of students. If they can achieve personal happiness in a job, that's all I care. If they don't become a menace to society. I want them to be a contributor to society, regardless of the occupation.

CM: I once had a principal that told me, "Cuba, if you really reach one student a year, you've earned your salary."

BM: Oh, I think I beat that.

CM: I was going to ask you if you were continuing to work with young people, and you have indicated that you do. You substitute occasionally, but mostly you just sort of see them. Can you elaborate on that a bit.

BM: Well, I live at the beach, so you have a lot of kids who come from a single parent, and they'd walk around. They'd always talk to me. I talked to them about let's get back to city college, let's do something. I have volunteered to go over to the school and teach writing, because there are a couple of gentlemen in town that do that. I find the older you are the better you are at this. Kids are not threatened by you. So I do that. I want to keep that substitute job so I can go at least a couple of days a month, or something like that, to do it.

CM: Are you doing that at National City now, now that Jaime's there?

BM: No, no.

CM: You're still going to Mar Vista.

BM: Mar Vista, Yes. I don't go too far. If I go someplace, it'll be to London or San Francisco or something.

CM: (chuckles) Okay. Now, obviously, you've touched lots of people, and I was going to ask if there were other adult school students of yours who have had comparable successes. Tell me about the doctor you mentioned.

BM: I ran this gifted program more or less parallel to like Columbia University. All these kids with high IQs were having trouble in classes. They were too smart for the class or it was boring or something like that. So we put them in one class two to three hours a day in which they'd get their English and their history credit. Because they were also taking science, and that's a heavy load, physics, chemistry, and all these other things. We sort of wanted to lessen the thing but put them into little projects. The stuff I got out of this group! They were just bright kids.

This one girl, Connie Mariano, just an outstanding girl. She went on to UCSD (University of California, San Diego) and then joined the navy and went to Bethesda, Maryland. She was assigned to the White House under President Bush, and when Clinton came along, he wanted to keep her. She was very nice to me. When Clinton was out here, it was a day I'll never forget. She took me up to meet the president here at North Island over here. He had his arm around me. He wanted to talk about [Alexis] de Toqueville and things. He was just quite a man.

CM: How nice.

BM: Well, she's a nice lady. And she was sharp. In that whole group of people – Charlie Jackson was in that group. He's a big computer mogul here in Southern California. You're asking me for a lot of names, and I can just go down the line picking out

where they sat and what they did. We used a lot of college text and a lot of phoning to authors and writers so they could see what the real world was like. A lot of these kids went on. All of them did, actually, went on to nice successful lives.

That program is a pathway to motivation and self-esteem plus learning subject matter, which can almost be transported over to the adult school, except the subject matter can be a little lessened. But it'll give them the feeling they do have the motivation and the skills to study, and that's basically what I wanted to do here. These people all came back and said, "Thank God you didn't burn us out."

CM: This then was a gifted program that was part of the high school program.

BM: Yes.

CM: But was set up kind of as an alternative for them rather than the –

BM: Right. This one man that is no longer with us, I think, Doug Peace, was instrumental, a good counselor at Mar Vista. He helped me with that program, Give Students a Chance, the one we had with Mr. Spies.

CM: Let's go back and talk about Jaime a little more. For all of his professional achievements, perhaps his greatest contribution now is as a role model. What makes him good at that?

BM: He's just in control. He's the type of guy, regardless what kind of harassment's going on, he knows how to handle situations. He knows how to handle teachers who get emotional or people who are down and out. He just has a nice way of coming up and saying, "We'll get through this some way or another, even if we have to make up some stuff. But we'll do it." I've seen him in discipline, too. He's very good at it. He's not threatening to the people. He gives the idea that he's in control, and you're

going to do it the way he wants it set up. It's not going to harm you. You're going to learn something from it.

And he has a posture about him. He's always well dressed, he always communicates, he always has something to say every morning, and he stands out in front of his school and sees people. A lot of kids say hello to him and stuff. A lot of people will run down the street just to see him. There's no better example than just Jaime is Jaime. They don't make them anymore. I'm glad I had a part to do with it, that he came up with the idea that you can take this world for what it is and do something successful.

The Sweetwater District's got to be proud of a man like Jaime because he's innovative, very innovative. Starts programs that some people don't even know about. And the kids like him. Remember, he's been in some tough schools. Palomar and some of these schools.

CM: Yes. I'm going to ask him about Palomar.

BM: They're not convents, you know. It's not Dominican or any of those places.

CM: Sweetwater probably has as large a minority student population as any district in the state.

BM: Well, that's what he's good at. He's actually very good at that. I've learned an awful lot from him about racist tendencies, and so forth, what people really want. Setting barriers is tough, that don't fence me in sort of type thing. Mending the walls, Robert Frost. Just try to keep people in their own group together and still diversify, still everybody get along well. Jaime had that way of doing it.

I mean, there are some people that make comments about how we run our

schools. And Jaime's just a blessing. He runs a school, has a lot of innovative new ideas to help people who really could flunk out. The adult schools do have the reputation of trying to keep people from flunking out, but they've got to find avenues to keep them from flunking out, because we're dealing with people, some of them aren't students, and they have to be turned into students.

Some of these boys, I ask them, "How come you don't bring your homework home?" "We do it in class." I say, "You're lying to me." Studying's hard. It's a hard thing to sit in a room by yourself and read a book, especially when you've got Mary Tyler Moore and everybody else on TV. Growing up with the radio is a lot different.

He's just number one to me, a good Socratic-type thinker. He wouldn't know that, but it's just his own philosophy. Just questions and answers and keep people thinking, basically, toward building their self-esteem, their motivation, good pathways for the future. And he pushes this. He's the little shovel that pushes them along.

CM: Okay. I think we're about to wind up. Do you have anything else about either adult education or Mr. Mercado that you want to add?

BM: Well, it's been a pleasure to speak to you. I've enjoyed that. These questions are very good. They bring back a lot of memories for me. It's tough to retire. I did have a lot of success, but I'll just have to go on. I think this is a good project, and I hope more people think about adult education.

CM: We all do. Of course, that's part of the aim of this is to keep people clued in on it. I want to thank you, Mr. Mills, not only for the interview but also for your contributions to adult ed, and most especially for being the caring, supportive teacher

that you've been for all the students that you've reached during your career. And that's very evident in talking to you, that you really care.

The Adult Education Students Succeed Initiative is a part of the California Adult Education Oral History Project.

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