

An Oral History of Senator Richard Polanco

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Subject: Richard Polanco (RP)

Section I

The Kid from Maravilla

Coming up in a tough part of East L.A., a young Richard Polanco learned early on to use his fists as a matter of survival. He eventually took that same fire in the belly into politics.

Dan Morain: On behalf of the journalism organization Open California, welcome to our ongoing series of Oral Histories, a project made possible by a grant from the California State Library. Today, we're talking with Richard Polanco. Mr. Polanco and I met in about 1992 when he was a California assemblyman, and I was a reporter assigned to cover the Capitol for the LA Times. For the next 10 years, I paid particular attention to assemblyman and later, Senator Polanco. He was a fascinating figure in California politics, always interesting, sometimes controversial, and impactful. He is the politician widely credited with being the most responsible for helping to grow the number of Latinos in the California Legislature, but he was more than that. And for the next few hours, we'll talk about some of how a guy from Maravilla became what they called "the architect." So let's briefly start at the beginning. Tell me about Maravilla. The fourth of eight kids.

Richard Polanco: Born and raised in East LA. Within East Los Angeles, the unincorporated area, there is a community referred to as Maravilla. Back then, went to public schools, Brooklyn Elementary, Griffith Junior High, and Garfield High School. Had a great time in the elementary school, got involved in organized sports. We had a playground director who was fabulous. Mr. Rod Roscoe, he had seasons. Junior high school was great, dabbled then in student government. High school was fantastic.

DM: Well, you were president of your eighth grade class, as I read.

RP: That's correct. And then at Garfield High School, my three years there were great. It was at the height of the student walkouts as well. It was during the times of the moratorium, and so I...

DM: So this is 1968?

RP: I was at Garfield from '66 to '69.

DM: '69.

RP: And played three years varsity basketball.

DM: Point guard, is that right? There you go.

RP: Point guard, making the play. And second in the league in pole vaulting.

DM: Really? [laughter]

RP: I couldn't run distance. I wasn't a sprinter. And so the coach said, "Hey, here's this steel pole," back then, right? And so I used that, but then came the finals... Or the semi-finals and I qualified, and was able to place second in the league finals with a fiberglass. That's when the fiberglass...but growing up in East LA, I sold oranges as a kid, door to door.

DM: What kind of oranges?

[chuckle]

RP: What kind would you like?

[laughter]

RP: They're nice, fresh, juicy oranges, only 50 cents a bucket. That was my little sales pitch. And lo and behold...

DM: How much did you make?

RP: 10 cents on the bucket. Door to door, after school and weekends except Sunday.

DM: Where did you get the oranges?

RP: We had, where we grew up, the Robles family, Brooklyn, which is now Cesar, the Robles family had a fruit stand in front of their home. So it was the fruit stand, the house in the back, and they had these trucks, and they had a little warehouse in the back, so they would go to the produce, pick up the boxes of oranges... I think it was two brothers or three brothers, and each one had their crew and they would go out and we would sell oranges...

DM: I see.

RP: In Cypress Park, where I ended up representing. In Lincoln Heights, in Estrada Courts. It was just another way to earn a little bit of money, come back, and obviously give what I made to my mom. And so...

DM: Your father worked in a foundry and a bakery. Two jobs.

RP: Yes. My father was a foundry... Worked in the foundry, meaning these huge... stoves is not the right term but...

DM: Furnaces.

RP: Furnaces. You could hear the sound and the heat the minute you walked into the door. And he took me there in the summer, and he was giving me a message that this is... You don't go to

school and get educated, this is where you end up. My father was also a baker. My father had a great reputation of being a baker. It was my first job out of high school. He took me to Dolly Madison and he took my older brother, who ended up being a Certified Grocers' baking division. Pretty much all of us had a baking experience.

DM: Yeah.

RP: And so back then it was a union job. Local 37 was the baker confectionery workers. My younger brother Danny ended up being the Secretary Treasurer of that union. And so recently, there was a big march and protest here against one of the, for better wages for the confectionery workers of this union. When you compared their wages to the wages back east, they were earning \$6 more, which was a surprise and not acceptable. And so the County Federation of Labor and all the political leaders, we crescendoed and finally, they were able to reach an agreement.

DM: So now this foundry, my wild guess is no longer is in existence here.

RP: It no longer exists.

DM: So today, a father, what kind of job might he get similar to what was in the foundry? I mean, the economy of LA has changed.

RP: I don't think you...

DM: For the better?

RP: Oh, certainly. But if you look at East LA the economy, when I was growing up, this was a rubber factory. This was Goodyear.

DM: Citadel.

RP: Citadel was Royal, a different tire company. Calcan's... American Cal... I'm pointing out these because these were employment centers and the city of Vernon, huge employment. So between City of Commerce and Vernon, you had tremendous jobs. East LA per se, where the foundries were located at... still exists. That street still exists, but it's no longer there. The bakery closed. My dad retired from Foix but there's still bakeries around. And so I'm not sure what would be equivalent or comparable to working in that kind of a setting. We had the steel mills here in on State Street, US Steel in Huntington Park. So, and, huge slaughterhouses.

DM: One right by a school, as I recall.

RP: Grew up right across the street from old Virginia [unclear]. And every morning these trucks would line up and as they're lining up in the morning and in the evening, you could see the blood dripping on the gutter.

DM: This was right across from...

RP: Right across the street from Brooklyn Elementary School. No longer there, but for the organizing that took place in that community, by that community, with the Maravilla Neighborhood Redevelopment program. This was a federal program that was funded through the federal government, through the county board of supervisors. Since East LA is unincorporated, it doesn't have a local city council. Its local representation is at the city with the county board.

DM: So before we get there, so tell me... Well, tell me about Richard Polanco getting involved in politics. You were eighth grade class president, Garfield's school politics, but then you met Cesar Chavez at some point, right?

RP: Out of high school, my first community work was doing gang work in the housing projects of Maravilla. And today crisis intervention, all these other kinds of terms are used. It was straight gang work. We were there counselling, we were job developer, we were social worker. We were a probation officer to young men and women who were having difficult times.

DM: Trying to get them out of gangs, trying to...

RP: Trying to get them out of gangs.

DM: Prevent them from joining.

RP: Getting them out of the gang. We were successful. When the housing projects became a redevelopment program, we were able to earmark 10% of that project for job training. And we used, the labor organizations, the general managers or the general contractors would always say, "Yeah, we'll look... We'll hire local, but you gotta be a member of the union." Well, back then, unions were pretty, pretty closed, no...

DM: When you say they were closed, they were closed to...

RP: Ethnic minorities.

DM: Latinos?

RP: Yes. Ethnic minorities, I would say. The electricians, obviously operating engineers, for sure. Carpenters. Maybe not as much for the laborers. So with this training money, we would... We identified two individuals from each of the rival gangs. And they would go for a week away and get trained, and then come back for the weekend. But we have to go back. And so we were able to begin to break those particular barriers with some of the folks.

DM: So, George Pla in the book *Power Shift*, terrific book by the way, describes Maravilla as a hardcore neighborhood.

RP: Oh, every four blocks.

DM: Every four blocks. Well, tell me about every four blocks.

RP: Yeah. So East LA, when you look at it, Maravilla, the housing projects, 504 units had at least four to five gangs. Your front yard was not yours. Your back yard was not yours. It was built like barracks, basically, military barracks. That's what they were up until when we did the redevelopment. And so it... That's just in the housing projects. Now you come to the greater unincorporated area and every four blocks is like a different gang. So I grew up on a street called Arizona. That's Little Arizona, a gang. Next was Lotte. On the other side of Lotte was Lopez, further down. So you begin to see these territories that existed. It was really interesting because we didn't own the land, the majority of the people [chuckle] there, we were living, we were not homeowners. We were renters for all intent and purpose. The majority. And so, it was a tough neighborhood and you had to hold... Be tough when you needed to be tough.

DM: And so how did you avoid...

RP: Getting sucked in?

DM: The gang world?

RP: When I was in elementary school, in the sixth grade, I was attending the East Side Boys Club and there was a boxing program. So I learned to box. And I had one particular... as time went on and I became a teenager, I had one particular fight with this one particular individual who was very prominent in the neighborhood, in the local gang. And make the long story short, he and I had a fair fight. I boxed the ears out of him. I dotted his eye. He was older. He had just come out of youth authority as well. And I gained a reputation of, if you're going to get into a fight with him, you're going to be in a fight. And to his credit, he let it be known that, how and...

DM: Do you have any idea what happened to him?

RP: Oh yeah. Yeah.

DM: What happened to him?

RP: He grew up, he ended up going to San Quentin. And got out and he died of hepatitis.

DM: Drug-related?

RP: Probably, yes. Probably in the joint where he got it. Which is interesting because I did several hearings on Hep C back then. I was looking in the garage and I came across my speeches. And it was, back then it was as prevalent and worse, in terms of there's no cure for it, than HIV.

DM: Yeah.

RP: So I learned to defend myself, to answer your question, and I think you'd get respect from that. And I didn't have to do it that often.

DM: So I asked a little bit about your father and your... Both your parents were born in the States

but in California, I take it.

RP: My mother is from Chihuahua, Mexico.

DM: Oh, okay.

RP: And my dad was born in Texas.

DM: I see. I see.

RP: And he came, migrated. I never got to meet my grandparents on my mother's side. She was orphaned when she was small and she had two brothers and two sisters, and they were here and incrementally, they came and they brought her.

DM: I see.

RP: My mom married at 14 years old.

DM: And has eight kids. By what age?

RP: My mom's first, my brother Carlos is from a first relationship. My oldest sister, Gloria, is from a first relationship.

DM: I see.

RP: The rest of us are from my father, Lorenzo and Maria.

DM: And I read that they didn't speak English.

RP: Oh, yeah. My mom was monolingual, my dad the same. We spoke Spanish in the home. Couldn't speak English at school. It was prohibited.

DM: You couldn't speak *Spanish* at school.

RP: I'm sorry. We couldn't speak Spanish at school. Right. Right. And so, the stories are many. The ruler to the hand if you spoke Spanish, going to the corner if you spoke Spanish...

DM: Really?

RP: Yeah. Yeah. Stupid, really back then.

DM: Yeah. Yeah.

RP: And even today. Today we're multilingual. It's global. It's better to have more than one language. It's complete. But my dad was a... for a long time, unfortunately, he was a working alcoholic and I hated weekends. I hated weekends because that's when my father would come

home drunk and become violent and verbally abuse...but we never went without. We never went without food or clothing or the Christmas... Our Christmases, I remember going to the East Side Boys Club many a times growing up. But we would also have small gifts from my parents, my father, basically, who was the breadwinner.

DM: So your mom had... Well, you describe it. Tell me what happened with your mom when you were a kid.

RP: So my mom experienced an episode, a mental episode. We would call it a nervous breakdown.

DM: How old were you?

RP: I was still in, probably a sixth grader in elementary school or seventh, sixth grader. I was in elementary school. And so 11, 10, 11 years old. And my mother is experiencing and her behaviors and her language, and...is like never seen before.

DM: So describe it. What, was she delusional? Was she hallucinating? What was going on?

RP: She was delusional. She was hallucinating. She would fall on the floor. She would yell. And I immediately ran out. It was on a Friday. I went to the church, brought the pastor back. My mother was there, being attended by ambulance workers who couldn't communicate with her.

DM: Because they spoke English and she spoke Spanish.

RP: Right.

DM: And so, where'd she go?

RP: My mom was not taken anywhere. My mom stayed at home. We had a couple of neighbors. Back then, neighborhoods were real neighborhoods. They took care of each other. And so my mother ends up, as I recall, not being transported. And the pastor comes and they pray, and she calms down. And I don't know if my mother... I remember my mother spending time either in a... for TB, in a sanitarium, or at that, I'm not sure if that was a mental institution. I wanna believe and I strongly believe it was more, the sanitarium for TB. Back then, very prevalent. Very prevalent. My mother was very religious. We were baptized Catholic, we were raised Protestants. We were the only...

DM: Evangelical.

RP: Evangelical.

DM: Yeah.

RP: The only hallelujahs [laughter] on our block. And so it was her faith that I believe got her through, and it was her strong faith that reached finally my father, who overnight was born again

and didn't touch a drink.

DM: So this episode, this nervous breakdown, as you say, is that what caused your father to get straight?

RP: It could have been. We never really talked about it, and I never really talked to my mom about it.

DM: Did this persist throughout her life after that?

RP: My mother was very temperamental, so she had a quick temper. My mother was mathematically very smart, couldn't read and write, but knew numbers. Built a little real estate thing. One house, used the equity, bought another.

DM: Oh, really?

[laughter]

RP: So.

DM: Flipping houses.

RP: The first house was on Arizona. We used to live adjacent to an alley on Kern, which is Kern then Arizona. The alley was a shooting gallery for heroin guys. That's what was going on back then. And so, two houses were built on a lot and my mother saved up and put a down payment, and used the back house to help pay the mortgage. From there, she went and bought a home in City of Commerce. And that was given to my younger brother and he moved in. And then, she did the same for all my brothers, pretty much. I was not willing to accept it. She loaned me money for my campaign, which I paid back [laughter], and that was, to me that was enough. Yeah.

DM: Interesting. So, I should set the time frame, as we speak you're 71. So that means you would've been born in 1951.

RP: '51.

DM: '51. Okay. And so if you were in sixth or seventh grade, this would, and you say you're 11, so this would've been '62. So this was before the so-called reforms and emptying of state hospitals and all that sort of thing. So...

RP: That's right.

DM: So your mother could have ended up in an asylum for all this, but she didn't. That's interesting.

RP: And I think that the people, the community, we had had this taboo, a stigma. We would

refer to it as Le Casa de Locos, the House of Crazyies.

DM: Right.

RP: And so it was something that we're glad she didn't go into an asylum.

DM: Right, right. Well, you... This then helps inform some of your work as a legislator. But before we go there, let's fast forward to 1982. You're running for Assembly. Let's just set the stage for that a little bit.

RP: So in 1982, I come to realize that Art Torres had been in office for some time and very popular. Richard Alatorre has served longer than Art. And I realized that if I was wanting to get into the public arena as an elected official, I had to create my own opportunity. And so I had been working for Ed Edelman and...

DM: Edelman's a...

RP: County supervisor.

DM: County supervisor in LA.

RP: Right. County supervisor in Los Angeles. And it gave me an opportunity to really engage in the community, my history with the housing and redevelopment. I had a strong presence and I felt...

DM: Talk a little bit about Supervisor Edelman. He was part of, the sort of the West Side power.

RP: Edelman was the West side power, and.

DM: But his district came over to your neighborhood.

RP: Oh it came all the way to East LA, down to the southeast areas. I was his field deputy and we opened...

DM: So, what's the significance of that?

RP: Oh my God. Little did I know, the influence and the power and the ability to get things done for communities and people who have difficulties with government. I come to realize that government has a role, can play a role in making a real difference, daily lives of people. When someone was calling for a welfare check or assistance with whatever county issue, remember East LA at that time had over a hundred thousand people in the unincorporated area, but its local government did not exist. It was LA County. And so when Ed announced the opening of a district office, it was myself and Alice Carreon, my secretary, and we did...

DM: How did you get this job?

RP: It was interesting. I think what was happening is Ed Edelman ran against John Ferraro [Photo 5]. And...

DM: Who was the city councilman.

RP: He was the city councilman at the time. Ralph Ochoa, who was working in Sacramento, I had known and met, when he was with Leo McCarthy's office. So Ralph is on one camp with Esteban Torres and pretty much Esteban Torres and David, we decide to support Ed Edelman.

DM: David?

RP: Lizárraga.

DM: Lizárraga?

RP: Yes. And then you had Richard and Art supporting John Ferraro. And so Ed wins, there's a young lady by the name of Lorraine Alvarez, who gets appointed first. Jesus Melendez, lawyer, second, Ron Adias, third, he's the senior deputy. And then I'm the field deputy. So, Ed did diversity way back when, with four of us. Not one, not four. The former assemblywoman from Yolo County, Japanese American. [Mariko Yamada]

DM: Her name will come to me. Her name will come to me. [laughter]

RP: She was a field deputy as well.

DM: Really? Okay.

RP: That's when we met.

DM: Yeah.

RP: Yes.

DM: Yeah.

RP: And so Ed was involved, representing the folks. He did a lot of stuff in the child protection area, but he also did the very first public hearing on auto insurance. And the United Neighborhood Organization was a group of all the Catholic churches that had come together, and they had organized each parish, and they developed an assessment.... they did an assessment as to what the needs were. And this was all Saul Alinsky organizing that was taking place, of which I got trained.

DM: You got trained by Saul Alinsky.

RP: Its institute. Myself and Fred Fujioka, and a couple of other folks. So... Gee, I lost my thought there.

DM: Well, so the question was how Edelman came to choose you. But you've already been involved with anti-gang efforts. You did...

RP: Redevelopment.

DM: You did work for Jerry Brown, right?

RP: Jerry Brown came after.

DM: Right.

RP: Yes.

DM: But you've become involved with farm workers in East LA.

RP: Yes. My role with Cesar [Chavez], I closed a Lucky Market that was located, they no longer exist, the brand. But it was in Cinco Puntos, it's Five Points. Lucky Market. Got there with my flyers and really experienced the power of one.

DM: Well, is this the grape boycott? What is this?

RP: The grape...

DM: So this is '68ish?

RP: Yep.

DM: Right around there?

RP: Yep.

DM: So you're all of...

RP: I'm in high school.

DM: You're a 17-year-old kid?

RP: Yeah.

DM: Yeah.

RP: And so, his name. Just, "Por favor. No compre aqui."

DM: "Don't shop here."

[laughter]

RP: That was empty by noon, with the exception of the employees' cars. We'd give them the flyers: Cesar Chavez, "Por favor, No compre aqui." And so, it was my first real experience. And then in college, obviously, it continues. But back then, there was this dynamic of urban Chicanos and the rural Chicanos. For a short period, it was their problem, not ours. Until we became educated, that the "El Teatro Campesinos" were incredible, in terms of going to college campuses and doing these theatres and role playing what was occurring. The artwork that was... And posters. There was just this massive communication network of educating and sensitizing, and creating a movement that was open to like people from all over, every ethnic group, every religious group. And so it was an honor when Cesar, in 1982, endorsed me over Gloria Molina. So it was law enforcement, Cesar with me, a couple of unions, but for all intent and purpose, it was Art Torres, Willie Brown, and then Jim Wood, who was secretary of the LA County Federation of Labor, that were with her.

DM: With Gloria Molina?

RP: With Gloria Molina. Yes. And I lost that race.

DM: Well, but you also laid some foundation for what would happen a couple years later.

RP: I did.

DM: But this was with the help, I guess, of having been a field deputy for Supervisor Edelman.

RP: Yes.

DM: People call you and they say whatever their problem is, and you fix it.

RP: Yeah, people would call, I would communicate it to the director of the department where the inquiry needed to be, and lo and behold, the problem would be addressed and fixed, corrected, absolutely. And to me, that experience was just like, oh my goodness. Right? Because I'm coming from a generation that questions government. That has been lied to. That is protesting the wars in Vietnam. That has witnessed the South and all the injustices. That's my generation, that's my frame of thought.

DM: You avoid the draft. How? Or you didn't get drafted. I'm sure lots of your neighbors did.

RP: Oh, my brother, my neighbor, my neighbors. The lottery kicked in when, what was it? The lottery gave me a high number, therefore, I did not serve. My brother did serve. My cousin served in the Marines, got shot, was RTD bus driver back then. My brother Carlos and Charlie, who lives several... They were in Vietnam and lo and behold, they're in the same camp and they hook up, and they... My brother played the guitar and so did Charlie. And so to your question, government has a role to play. And I saw also the ugly side, where it could have a negative.

DM: Well, so anyway, so Willie Brown, the most influential member of the legislature is

backing Molina. She wins that seat and you lose.

RP: I then lick my wounds and I go and raise money for Marty Martinez. Almost...

DM: Member of Congress.

RP: Member of Congress, almost immediately, after my June primary because in the primaries, you win the primary, it's over and then the... Oh, excuse me. We were... It was a November election, it wasn't... Was it the primary? Yes, it was the primary. Anyways, I'll have to get clear on that, but I went to work raising money. This is where I met Martha Escutia for the first time.

DM: Working for [Marty] Martinez.

RP: Working for Congressman Martinez.

DM: I see.

RP: And Martha was doing op-ed research.

RP: Against (John) Rousselot.

DM: So Martinez beats Rousselot?

RP: Martinez beats Rousselot.

DM: And Rousselot was a very conservative, beyond conservative.

RP: Founder of the John Birch Society. Very, very conservative. And no one gave Marty a chance, but for the op-ed research that was done by Martha Escutia that became a series of inquiries and the campaign, he lost. He lost the race.

DM: So then you're working for Martinez, raising money, but then you're laying the foundation to run again?

RP: I was not going to give up. It was my dream.

DM: Why did you set your sights on Sacramento as opposed to... LA City Council as opposed to following Ed Edelman's footsteps?

RP: LA City Council had [Richard] Alatorre already there. And had East LA been incorporated, I would've been a council member. Now Soto and I, and Alex Sotomayor, who is the executive director of the Maravilla Foundation, we ran as a slate. The issue lost.

DM: To incorporate East...

RP: To incorporate East LA, in the '70s. And so we went around being council members without

a city. And so to your question, why not local? There was no local. County supervisor, oh my God.

DM: You couldn't play on the West side.

RP: Couldn't play on the West side. Couldn't raise the money.

DM: Couldn't raise the money. Well, that's where the money was, on the West side.

RP: Exactly. It still is.

DM: Anyway so you're laying the foundation for your next run. And tell me how that plays out. Who were you working for, by the way, at this time?

RP: I am working for no elected during the fundraising. So I'm working for the campaign. Then the campaign's over and Richard Alatorre hires me. I come to work for Richard for four years. And in those four years, I continue to build. I'm new to that area, my base is here. This is a whole new district, assembly district, and so...

DM: This is a new assembly district carved by Alatorre?

RP: Carved by Alatorre.

DM: Redistricting?

RP: Right. And so I got another shot. But for the African American community in the northeast part of the district back then, and the Latinos, all things being equal, they came out like two to one for me, and that is what carried me over.

DM: So you were elected in 1986?

RP: Correct.

DM: And right after you take office, you have this very consequential vote that really does help define your next few years. So, tell us about that.

RP: So I'm in committee.

DM: Which committee? Public safety?

RP: It's a public safety committee.

DM: Public safety.

RP: Larry (Stirling), is it? No, Larry, he's now a judge in San Diego... Anyways, he's the chairman and the committee has an issue of siting prisons and the East LA prison is included.

DM: So this is 19... So, you're like 1986, this is the year Tom Bradley loses his second run against George Deukmejian. George Deukmejian is the governor, and among the many things that George Deukmejian did was he built a lot of prisons. And so he is looking for a prison in...

RP: In LA County, per se.

DM: In LA County.

RP: Because a large percentage of the inmates come from LA County, but there's no prison in LA County. So the rationale is to, hey, let's build a prison in LA County. They coined it as East LA, and for those who are from East LA...

DM: You know East LA.

RP: We know East LA. The prison was never going to be in East LA.

DM: Where was it?

RP: It was if you, from here, you go to City Hall and then you go about two miles southeast or south, that's where it's at. That is not East LA. And so I was tagged with, I'm supporting a prison in East LA.

DM: Well, Speaker Brown comes and asks you to vote for it, as I understand it, but you know the story because you were there.

RP: I don't remember. If in fact, he did... If he remembers, I'm not going to question that.

DM: At any rate. You vote...

RP: I vote for it. It comes out and years go by. It's still not, it seemed like a couple of years, because Art Torres is in the Senate and the issue comes up again. And I end up having amendments to his bill that legislatively puts no prison in East Los Angeles.

DM: Well, but in the meantime, you've gotten sideways with Assemblywoman and then Councilwoman (Gloria) Molina, because she is opposing this.

RP: Correct. I think historically, from a public policy perspective, with probably that exception, we were on opposite sides. But ultimately, when you look at overall in the end result, we were on the same side. When we look at politically speaking and the political operation, we always had different candidates. And to me, that's fair game that she can run her candidates and we ran ours. And we were more successful in running our candidates than she was, but for all intent and purpose, from the policy, I can feel comfortable in saying that we agreed on a lot of the policy.

DM: Sure, but there were the protests against the prison. The Mothers of East LA. There were some LA Times reporters back then – writers, columnists – who took great issue with this, so

you took a lot of flak over this.

RP: I took tremendous flak. Tremendous flak. I did, and I think that had the reporters got it right from the beginning, East LA is zip code 90022. There was no prison that was going to be built in East LA. And I say to the journalists back then, they did a disservice, whether they were directed by their bosses to do it and keep it... and it sold news and it was on the... I don't think it would have been that sexy to say, "Hey, in South Central or in the city limits, a prison is going to be built." That's not sexy and that would not sell news, unfortunately. And it was factually incorrect, in my opinion.

DM: Geographically incorrect.

RP: Geographically, totally incorrect. Yes, totally incorrect.

DM: Anyway, but you...

RP: I took a big hit but I was still successful.

DM: So the prison ends up not getting built anywhere near East LA or south of City Hall, it gets built elsewhere.

RP: In Lancaster.

DM: And you, I guess, had some role in that as well.

RP: Well, that was part of the amendment that we put into Art Torres's bill, and then Art and I came out and announced it among many of those who had protested against it.

DM: So the prison ends up not getting built near the city, it gets built at the north end of the county, and so that...

RP: That brings an end.

DM: Right. Nonetheless, there are numerous instances where you and Councilwoman Molina and then Supervisor Molina run opposite candidates against one another. One is your old assembly seat. So you're elected to the Senate, and so tell me about the thinking in your support of... I think he was your chief of staff, Bill Maibe, versus a guy who went on to some notoriety, Antonio Villaraigosa.

RP: Right. So I end up supporting Bill because Bill demonstrated a real commitment to the northeast community. Much of my accomplishments, I give credit to my staff, as it should be. Antonio did not have a track record here, Antonio could not point to community projects and I took heat. I took heat for not supporting "another Latino," who I felt did not merit, did not have the level of commitment that Bill had demonstrated. Bill ran a good race. In retrospect, I think if there was an issue that was outstanding that we should have looked at and communicated more, was the issue of choice. Which is interesting.

DM: Abortion rights?

RP: Yeah.

DM: How so?

RP: I think that the women pieces were not enough on the issue of... Bill was pro-choice, we just didn't communicate it hard enough, I think. It was more community-driven. And so, based on what I believe the community merit, the quality of service, the history, the commitment, Bill met that.

DM: Okay. So that was 1992, right? Or was it '94? We'll figure this out. So you're an assemblyman starting 1987. Deukmejian's governor then Pete Wilson runs and becomes governor in 1990. How do you navigate this? You're a first-time Assembly member, how do you... Give me some examples of what you do to get bills to the desk of governors who are of a different party.

RP: And I think the politics are not... were not as polarizing on issues as they are today, at least at the national level. I think that back then, I realized that there are certain issues that my liberal friends could not support, but that were relevant and important to low-income predominantly Latino communities and families. Case in point, when we had the Air Quality District years ago, the desire to clean the air is important. It still is. And back then, they were closing entire sectors that employed our people, Latino families and ethnic minorities, without any remorse or retraining or offering. It was just this way and the highway. And so we saw the furniture industry go away. I forget what other sectors, but they were...

DM: Or maybe foundries, for example.

RP: And foundries for sure. But foundries, I think were already... This is in the '90, foundries were pretty much a thing. But what happened... This is what Curt Pringle and I get together and we bring the AQMD's budget to the state...

DM: So Curt Pringle is an Assemblyman from Anaheim?

RP: Correct. And...

DM: And went on to become Speaker for a short while, but pretty conservative guy. But also, also not an unreasonable politician.

RP: No. And I found him and others to be very supportive of issues that... the other example is the leaf blower. The leaf blower for gardeners.

DM: There was a move to ban leaf blowers.

RP: Exactly. The city of LA did that...

DM: They were gas-powered and they were noisy and...

RP: And back then, right, what would we do with rule and regulation if it was corporate America? We would give them one or two years. Let's do an exit strategy. No, with here, these were the working tools of men and women that immediately banned. What happens to the income of that family? We had a tendency to deal with people of lower socioeconomics differently. That hurt them and had negative impacts so...

DM: So you were able to stop this ban on leaf blowers.

RP: We were able to... Not only... We were able to mitigate the plan, and so today, they didn't have back then, the electric leaf blowers. And so today, they're available. It took time for the manufacturers to create what it would be, begin to market it. And it took time for the AQMD to accept that this manner, in which historically, they were impacting the lower socioeconomic families, without any consideration, there was going to be a fight for that. We could ultimately get to where we wanted to get and we're there, but would have been a lot easier had it been done that way.

DM: So one of the issues that I know you became involved in was... Well, mental health issues, which I assume has its genesis in what happened with your mom. Why don't you talk a little bit about that?

RP: So I was a member of the Health Committee and I was appointed chair of the sub-committee on mental health. And I remember giving testimony on the subject matter. It was... Mental health has always been looked from a health perspective, I hate to say, use the term... Let's just say secondary. I was going to say, a step child, but no, secondary and an afterthought to the full discussion. And so I, as chair, based on the experience that I had with my mom's episode, the lack of communication and then bringing in the experts to come and give testimony, we developed a series of bills; some successful and some were not, in the area of mental health. I think that the whole question of having mental health become a part of your health plans was important.

DM: Mental health parity.

RP: Mental health parity, and I don't remember... I know I author... Or authored several... I'm not sure of which number of bills were actually signed, but I did do some research on my bills on mental health. Many got out of committee. A couple in Approps because of the cost, but as the issue began to evolve and become... more education on the issue and the needs and the disparities and the lack of bilingual services and competencies, we've come a long ways. We saw Assemblywoman [Helen] Thomson's comprehensive mental health, I think it was, that she moved and then obviously, [Darrell] Steinberg's bill that provided the necessary funding for mental health services. So it's been kind of like an evolution of what has occurred.

DM: Well, so you voted with Helen Thomson on her legislation as related to more intensive care for people who are mentally ill, for parity. And you voted with Steinberg to increase funding,

correct? Right?

RP: Correct. Yes.

DM: So you're part of this coalition?

RP: I was part of the coalition. I think had been there prior to both of them getting there. The coalition that was started then continued, just never gave up, little by little. It may not be one year, two years, three years, could be four years. I mean, Steinberg's took a long time.

End of Section I