Saving Tradition

By Juan Gómez-Quiñones and Irene Vásquez
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Irene Vásquez is making sure the Chicana and Chicano movement is never forgotten. "The movement—the leadership it produced and the legacy that it leaves, absolutely has shaped our own society today," Vásquez says.

While studying at UCLA, student activism drew Vásquez in. She was part of a group of students fighting for a Chicana and Chicano Studies program there. "All of that was so dynamic ... and I guess it was just a sum of all my background that made me interested in wanting to be a part of Chicano studies," she says.

Years later, she would do the same at the University of New Mexico, where, in 1983, she helped establish a Chicana and Chicano Studies degree program and became its director.

In 2005, Vásquez and Juan Gómez-Quiñones co-authored an essay on the Chicana and Chicano movement, which was published in the New Dictionary of the History of Ideas. The essay would soon roll in to a bigger project, Making Aztlán. After about six years of research and writing, the book would go to print.

Making Aztlán probes the Chicana and Chicano movement—its origins and its evolution. Here, Vásquez talks about key subjects like women and women leaders fighting to improve healthcare and education, as well as local organizations that developed in response to the movement.

ATM: Why was this time—the '60s and '70s—so critical for the Chicana and Chicano movement? Why was the timing right for this to happen?

Vásquez: It was a momentous time. It was happening during a time of social and political awakening, among a variety of sectors of the population. You have the anti-war movement; you have the women's movement, of course, the African-American civil rights movement that had been going on for several decades. It was a period where Mexicans were getting a sense of how marginalized they were in U.S. society and exploited as a key minority population in the U.S. But there were also—at least in the early '70s—some advancements.

Mexicans were becoming part of the professional class. I mean, it was a small percentage, but there were gains. Less than two percent of the Mexican population was in colleges and universities; less than a third had a high school education. ... You had a very small, but at least incrementally growing, professional and educated group of Mexicans. Especially as you have the organizing of Mexicans across the United States—particularly in the Southwest—to address local issues, whether they were police abuse, whether they were accessing more health and social services. So it was an important, unique, and momentous period in history because, up to that time, you hadn't seen that kind of mobilization.

ATM: Is it possible that today's Chicana and Chicano youth wouldn't be attending college if it weren't for this movement?

Vásquez: People were either dropping out because they were treated terribly in schools, the schools weren't engaging them, or the children had to help support their families ... so you have child labor in farm labor. The ones who were making it through—graduating from high school—were being tracked into vocational jobs and not encouraged to go on to college. So the ones who made it really were exceptional—I'm not talking about their intelligence, but in the way they persisted, and the fact that they had some opportunities with people in their life who encouraged and motivated them. But for the most part, many Mexican youth didn't have these kinds of support systems in the schools.