

Mia Valdez

Grandpa and The United Steelworkers

MV: Welcome to South Texas Stories. My name is Mia, and I got the chance to sit down and talk with my grandpa over the phone and discuss a fundamental part of Corpus Christi's labor union history. Born and raised in Corpus Christi Texas, Grandpa is seventy-five going on seventy-six.

CV: I'm Carlos H. Valdez Senior. I graduated from Carroll High School in 1963. I went to Del Mar College, and studied mechanics, and I got a mechanic's certificate degree—certificate, I'm sorry.

MV: So, we had to do our interview over the phone because of the Coronavirus pandemic. 2020 has been a crazy year for politics, medicine, and everything in between. For those of a future generation that may be listening, COVID has currently taken the lives of a quarter million people so far, and unfortunately that number continues to rise. There seems to be a promising vaccine on the way, so hopefully that will close up this chapter of history, or at least get us closer to that point. So back to where we were: in his golden years, my grandpa enjoys politics, hunting, the outdoors, spending time with family, photography, and gardening. In fact, he became a Master Gardener, and later became a Master Naturalist.

CV: When I retired ten years ago in 2009, I became a Master Gardener, because I was always interested in having my yard nice. By becoming a Master Gardener, I learned how to maximize my time, and keep up with all the latest trends in gardening and turf management and things like that. Right after that, being that I like the outdoors, I saw an ad in the paper that if you wanted to become a Master Naturalist, well, then go to this meeting on such-and-such day. So, I did, and I've been a Master Naturalist now for about ten years. I was elected President twice, and Vice President one time. And the last office I held was, I was an intern training coordinator, which I did training for all the interns that were coming into the Master Naturalists. I did that up until last year.

MV: Okay, so let's start to think about the sixties. There was so much political upheaval in the world during this time- notably, here in the United States, the Civil Rights movements. Kennedy was elected President and was assassinated in sixty-three. Martin Luther King Junior made his mark in history forever in 1963 and was assassinated in 1968. Additionally, the Vietnam War was going on full throttle, and there were protests breaking out everywhere to end the war. But, by the end of the sixties, we got our first man on the moon on July 16, 1969-- three days before my grandpa's first child and my dad, Carlos Junior was born. Well, before the birth of my dad, a lot happened in my Grandpa's life. Let's start when he joined the National Guard.

CV: I joined the National Guard in 1965, and I completed my obligation in 1971. How I joined the National Guard was that when I was at Del Mar, I had about four or five months left before I finished my mechanic's certificate, and I got drafted. So, there was no way out of the draft. I joined the National Guard and finished my certificate program at Del Mar, and

so then I went in the National Guard and started going to weekly meetings. But of course, if you know at that time, the Vietnam War really took off. Instead of weekly meetings, we were doing meetings every other week. And of course, that created a little bit of a hardship on me because when I went to the meeting[s], my job would let me go, but I didn't get paid. So, if I wasn't off on the weekends— which, I worked rotating shifts— if I wasn't off on the weekends, well, I just missed two days on that paycheck. Well when I started going to meetings twice a month, that, uh, that really put a strain on the paycheck.

MV: During this time, he was making minimum wage as a mechanic's assistant at a local car dealership. Minimum wage back then was a dollar and twenty-five cents an hour.

CV: In any event, I got through it and finished my obligation to the military in 1971. So yeah, those were six years.

MV: While he served, Grandpa also got a job offer that would change his views on politics and the world forever.

CV: My dad told me that they were hiring at the plant, that if I would be interested, and I said, "Well, I might be. What kind of work are we going to be doing?" And he said, "Well, you're probably going to be doing pick and shovel work." I said, "Oh, well that doesn't sound too inviting, but anyway tell me more. How much is the pay?" And he said, "Well, they're going to start you off at three dollars and fifty-two cents an hour." So, man my eyes about just popped out of my sockets. I said, my God, I'm going to triple my salary. You know yeah, it's pick and shovel work, but it can't be that bad for that money. So I told him yes, he took me to the personnel office, and in January, January the 27th, 1967, I started working at Asarco.

MV: All right, so let's talk about Asarco. American Smelting and Refining Company, Asarco for short, was organized in 1899 by a group of Gilded Age businessmen, probably the most recognizable name being William Rockefeller.¹ Although Asarco is still largely operating in the United States as a producer of copper, the plant that was in Corpus Christi along with many other branches in the sixties produced zinc and its byproduct, cadmium. Most zinc is used to add a protective barrier to other metals. The proper term for adding this barrier is called galvanizing. So, zinc is used to galvanize metals such as iron to prevent rusting. It's used for things that are pretty much always exposed to the elements, such as car bodies, streetlamp posts, safety barriers and suspension bridges.² Zinc's byproduct, cadmium, is commonly used in batteries, cells, plastic stabilizers, and pigments. Cadmium is actually in

¹ "Asarco," *Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History*, edited by Thomas Riggs, 2nd ed. Gale, 2015. <https://manowar.tamucc.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/galeque/asarco/0?institutionId=2313>

² "Zinc," Periodic Table, *Royal Society of Chemistry*. Accessed December 4, 2020. <https://www.rsc.org/periodic-table/element/30/zinc#:~:text=Most%20zinc%20is%20used%20to,as%20iron%2C%20to%20prevent%20rusting.&text=Zinc%20oxide%20is%20widely%20used.batteries%2C%20textiles%20and%20electrical%20equipment>.

rising demand because of the growing popularity of solar power, which is awesome.³ So Grandpa worked with these elements for eighteen years of his life and experienced many different things within this time.

CV: It was very interesting there. Eventually, my goal was to become a leadman, and when I reached about nine years at the plant, I was always taking tests, and I knew when my time would come because of my seniority to where I was going to get a leadman job. And for the last ten years, my employment with Asarco, I was a relief leadman.

MV: So as we learned, Grandpa went in as a laborer. Even though he says that his mechanic's certificate didn't really come in handy for him at the plant, some came in with no work experience at all. Interestingly though, studies show that since the workers, skilled and unskilled, were so cooperative with one another, the workforce was strengthened.⁴ So basically, if workers can make their own decisions or decide as a union to make decisions that benefit themselves, then the workplace and its employees will be better off. This was especially vital at a zinc plant like Asarco, where the labor and the environment were pretty brutal.

CV: The working conditions were tough. It was hard work. It was hot, and it was dusty and dirty. Being a member of the union, we negotiated for working conditions, pay, and things like that.

MV: Unions are one of the purest forms of democracy, in fact, they politicize people towards more democratic views that curb far-right authoritarian views.⁵ If it weren't for the formation of unions in order to fight for better working conditions, benefits, fair pay, and even things outside of the workplace like fighting racism, our country would not be as well off as we are today. Without unions, there is only conformity to the unjustness of the way things are.⁶ Of course, though, even today we still have a long path to crawl until we reach equality, which is why protecting and preserving unions is pivotal to positive change.

CV: At Asarco, I became aware of several things. I became aware that there was racism in our society, even though we had fought a Civil War, and several pieces of legislation had been passed, you know, to not have that. People got around the law, and because there was no severe consequences for the action, it continued to perpetuate itself. So, I became involved in the union because I felt that it was a good way for me to learn more about our country. And that's when I realized that he who has the political will, will make the rules and regulations for our country.

³ "Cadmium," Occupational Safety and Health Administration: Safety and Health Topics, *United States Department of Labor*. Accessed December 4, 2020. <https://www.osha.gov/cadmium>

⁴ Michael Nuwer, "From Batch to Flow: Production Technology and Work-Force Skills in the Steel Industry, 1880-1920." *Technology and Culture*, 29, no. 4 (1988), 811. doi:10.2307/3105046.

⁵ Karen Nussbaum, "Unions and Democracy." *Labor Studies Journal*, 44, no. 4 (2019). 365-372. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160449X19890523>

⁶ *Ibid.*

MV: Let's put it into perspective. At the time Grandpa was in the union, the Civil War had recently celebrated its one hundredth anniversary. But the remnants of the Civil War were still highly visible. In the South, segregation was fully alive, and Black people and allies of the movement were being jailed, beaten, and dying for equality. There were no severe consequences for aggressors, and often the victims would be blamed and face the consequences for trying to change the racist ideals of the majority. Even now, unions and individuals are fighting the same battles for equality that we fought for in the sixties' movements. Even though some things have gotten better, there is still a lack of justice for victims of hate crimes, and minor punishments for those who inflict the damage. Unions constantly fight unethical practices in and out of the workplace and strive to help people elect leaders that will follow suit. This was one of the jobs that Grandpa held in his union, Local 5022. Before that, he started out as the Good and Welfare Chairman, where he would visit the widows of passed members and present them with a Bible and the union's support with anything they needed. During this time, his infatuation with politics grew, which led him to take on the role of Political Action Chairman.

CV: I became the Political Action Chairman for the rest of the time that I worked at the plant. Political Action Chairman was the person that introduced the people that were running for office and who we supported and why we supported them, and encouraged the members to register to vote, to go out and vote, and to get involved in the candidate's campaign by passing out literature, bumper stickers, signs, and things like that.

MV: The union pushed Grandpa's heart and soul even further into politics, and he got to help the people of Corpus Christi let their voices be heard through voting.

CV: During that time, I became the election judge in my precinct, and the Precinct Chairman.

MV: Also during this time, there was a lot that Local 5022 had to negotiate with Asarco.

CV: Asarco was not a very good corporate neighbor. Asarco got cited many, many times for pollution violations, for dumping cadmium into the ship channel. You couldn't fish in the ship channel because all the water was polluted. They skirted the laws and the rules forever. They never updated their equipment. There was equipment that could be used to minimize the pollution that they were putting out into the air and harming the neighborhood around there. That neighborhood is called Dona Park. And those people there all had—not all, most of them—had cadmium or zinc in their bloods, which was detrimental to their health.

MV: As people in the community were harmed by the environment Asarco created, so were its workers. Many branches of Asarco were cited and suspended or shut down for pollution violations, which ultimately forced them to file for bankruptcy in 2005.

CV: They were really on them because they never modernized anything, or they just keep operating. They kept operating like they did when they started operating the plant back in the early forties, and—1985, that was the end of the dance because, they just—the EPA

would not let them deal out all that pollution into the air, and dirty the air, and of course make life miserable for the residents of Dona Park and elsewhere in the community.

MV: Just as the Steelworker Union tried to fix things inside the plant, they tackled even greater things on the outside. They played a huge role in bussing in Corpus Christi's schools, which forced the school district to face the inequality and racial discrimination of schools.

CV: The Steelworker Union filed a suit against the school district because of de facto and de jure segregation.

MV: As a refresher, let me define de facto discrimination and de jure segregation. De facto discrimination could be defined as unofficial, non-sanctioned practices of discrimination. An example would be business owners refusing service to Black people solely because they are Black or making Black and brown people use the back entrance to a building instead of the regular entrance. De jure segregation was officially sanctioned laws that legalized the separation of groups.⁷ As Grandpa mentioned, the union filed a suit against the school district for this—what became *Cisneros v. CCISD*. What happened was that since Mexican Americans are racially labeled as White, CCISD claimed that they were desegregating and integrating schools by putting the, quote-unquote, Whites with the Blacks, when really they were keeping the South Side's nice, fairly equipped White schools White, and the poorer West Side schools Black—but now, you know, with a bit of Brown mixed in.

CV: That suit went to the Supreme Court twice, and twice we won the suit. And it was concerning that schools on the West side were in very poor condition in relationship to those on the South side. So, one of the examples was whenever Moody was built. Well, it was built at the same time King was built. Well, King had a planetarium and Moody did not have anything even close to that. So, we sued the school district, and we won. After we won, there was school bussing, because they were putting too many people of the same race into one school.

MV: So, what we really want to get across here is that unions played a crucial role in making life much better for everybody within reach.

CV: Every benefit that any worker has today was, at some point or another, negotiated in a union contract by a union. And I'm talking about the forty-hour week, the eight-hour day, time-and-a-half after forty hours, and all those things. Without unions, there was child labor. There was people that were worked to death. So, unions came about by necessity. And as soon as unions became legal, businesses and corporations have tried their best—not all of them, but the majority of them—have tried their best to make it hard for unions to organize. But I sincerely believe that if we had a unionized society, we would have more people making a decent salary, to where they can make a decent living, and their families

⁷ "Legal English: 'De Facto/De Jure.'" Washington University in St. Louis. *Washington University School of Law*, December 28, 2012, accessed December 4, 2020.
<https://onlinelaw.wustl.edu/blog/legal-english-de-factode-jure/>

and their children could enjoy more things like vacations, going to the movies, eating out, and things like that. You could save money for your kids to go to college. So, it would benefit society as a whole.

MV: And on that note, I'd like to say that I learned so much from my grandpa, Carlos H. Valdez Senior, and I hope that you learned something new as well. If you have the opportunity to join your local union, or just make a difference in your community, do it. Know your candidates, vote in local elections, and let your voice be heard. Be the change you want to see. All right, I'm Mia Valdez, and I had a wonderful time being here and sharing this with y'all on South Texas Stories. Thanks for listening.

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