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East L.A., 1968: ‘Walkout!’ The day high school students helped ignite the Chicano power movement



The day Eastside students marched for better schools and helped launch a movement.

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Teachers at Garfield High School were winding down classes for the approaching lunch break when they heard the startling sound of people — they were not sure who — running through the halls, pounding on classroom doors. “Walkout!” they were shouting. “Walkout!”

They looked on in disbelief as hundreds of students streamed out of classrooms and assembled before the school entrance, their clenched fists held high. "*Viva la revolución*!" they called out. "Education, not eradication!" Soon, sheriff's deputies were rumbling in.

It was just past noon on a sunny Tuesday, March 5, 1968 — the day a Mexican American revolution began. Soon came walkouts at two more Eastside high schools, Roosevelt and Lincoln, in protest of run-down campuses, lack of college prep courses, and teachers who were poorly trained, indifferent or racist.

By the time the "blowouts" peaked about a week later, 22,000 students had stormed out of class, delivered impassioned speeches and clashed with police. Scenes of rebellion filled newspapers and television screens. School trustees held emergency meetings to try to quell the crisis; Mayor Sam Yorty suggested students had fallen under the influence of "communist agitators."

In the midst of the disruptions, Julian Nava, the only Mexican American on the Los Angeles Board of Education, turned to Superintendent of Schools Jack Crowther. "Jack," he said. "This is B.C. and AD. The schools will not be the same hereafter."

"Yes," said Crowther. "I know."

The East L.A. walkouts 50 years ago were the uniquely California embodiment of the fury and hope that marked much of 1968. The first act of mass militancy by Mexican Americans in modern California history set the tone for activism across the Southwest as America drifted into a year of social turmoil, assassinations, war and disillusionment.

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The walkouts focused national attention on a new force on the American political scene, the Chicano movement. Once a pejorative term, "Chicano" was adopted by a new generation of urbanized Mexican Americans as an emblem of ethnic pride, cultural awareness and a commitment to community.

"We caught the entire nation by surprise," said David Sanchez, founder of the militant Brown Berets, which had its seeds in the movement for educational reform and then took on farmworker rights, police brutality and the issue that managed to mobilize just about everyone who was protesting in 1968: the Vietnam War. "Before the walkouts, no one cared that substandard schools made it all but impossible for Chicano youths to find strength and pride in their culture, language and history — or to make the most of their lives," Sanchez said.

"After the walkouts," he added, "no one could deny that we were ready to go to prison if necessary for what we believed, which was this: With better education, the Chicano community could control its own destiny."

Pete Martinez, a former teacher at Lincoln, said students that year ignited a movement that would transform generations of Latinos in America. "In 1968, the kids kicked the doors open," he said.

With better education, the Chicano community could control its own destiny."

— David Sanchez, Brown Berets founder

In 1968, Mexican American students living east of downtown were funneled into high schools with some of the worst dropout rates in the nation — 57% at Garfield, 45% at Roosevelt, 39% at Lincoln.

Eastside schools were run-down and overcrowded, and the community had little political power. The Mexican American community was young — about half the population was under 20 — and there were no Mexican Americans on the City Council or Board of Supervisors.

At Eastside schools, Spanish speakers felt trapped in slower tracks that funneled them toward low-skilled jobs.

Harry Gamboa, now a celebrated photographer and performance artist, remembered the day in elementary school when the teacher led him to the front of the class and helped him fashion a hat made of construction paper as an art project. "She put it on my head and wrote the word 'Spanish' on it. She said I could take it off when I learned to speak English," he said. Years later, he would join the walkouts at Garfield.

Although the walkouts seemed spontaneous, they grew out of years of social activism. Since 1963, Camp Hess Kramer, a Jewish summer camp in Malibu, had hosted motivational programs for outstanding East L.A. students, who shared grievances about their underperforming high schools and neglected neighborhoods.

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Others stopped in at the Social Action Training Center, an effort run out the Church of the Epiphany in Lincoln Heights by John Luce, an Episcopal priest who supported labor leader Cesar Chavez.

Four young activists opened the La Piranya Coffee Shop in 1967 at the corner of Olympic and Goodrich boulevards as headquarters for their organization, Chicano Youths for Community Action. They were led by Sanchez, then a clean-cut 18, who was president of Yorty's youth advisory commission, and Vickie Castro, a Cal State Los Angeles student who, years later, would become the second Latino ever elected to the Los Angeles Board of Education.

We were all products of Camp Kramer and Church of the Epiphany and, therefore, aspired to remake society."

— Vickie Castro

"We were all products of Camp Kramer and Church of the Epiphany and, therefore, aspired to remake society," Castro recalled. "At La Piranya, we organized strategies for

doing just that, and shared outrage over things like a Time magazine article that described East L.A. as 'reeking of garbage and wine.'"

La Piranya's walls were covered with murals depicting scenes from Mexico's past, and a startling declaration in large black letters: *"Por mi raza mato,"* or "For my race I kill."

Revolution was in the air. Black militant Stokely Carmichael swung by La Piranya. So did two figures known for their edgy and angry brand of activism — Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales of Colorado and Reies Tijerina of New Mexico.

One day in 1967, hours before a protest against police harassment, Sanchez ran by the garment district to buy a dozen berets — the headgear seen on countless posters of Latin American revolutionary Che Guevara. Back at La Piranya, he dealt them out like playing cards, saying, "Put these on, we're going to a demonstration."

The Chicano Youths for Community Action had became the Brown Berets.

The group operated under a manual written by Sanchez that included a passage members were required to memorize:

"For over 20 years, the Mexican American has suffered at the hands of the Anglo establishment. He is discriminated against in schooling, housing, in employment and in every other phase of life. Because of this situation, the Mexican American has become the lowest achiever of any minority group in the entire Southwest."

What people were only beginning to realize was that — much as the students at a Florida high school this year have seized the debate over gun control from the adults — it was the high school students of East L.A. who would refuse to wait for the adults to act.

Sal Castro, then a social studies teacher at Lincoln and a charismatic guest speaker at La Piranya, said his students "wanted things changed at the school. They wanted to hold what they called a 'blowout' — a walkout."

His response: "Organize. What do you need?"

The original plan was to present a series of demands — and the threat of a walkout — to the school board in 1967. The plot fizzled.

But the next year, on Friday, March 1, the principal at Wilson High in El Sereno abruptly canceled the school play, "Barefoot in the Park," a romantic comedy deemed risque. Hundreds of students walked off campus in anger.

The organizers of the failed walkout plot saw their chance. Sal Castro, Brown Berets, college students and others, including students recruited from high schools, holed up at La Piranya and other hangouts over the weekend to prepare.

By Tuesday, March 5, they were ready to launch. Joseph Rodriguez, then a sophomore at Garfield High, recalled sitting in basic biology class when "someone banged on our wooden door yelling, 'Walkout! Walkout!' We heard commotion outside. Many of us, including the teacher, ran to the window to see what was going on.

"My teacher looked me in the eyes," Rodriguez recalled, "and said, 'I can see you're really interested in this stuff. You're free to go.'"

Rodriguez saw students hemorrhaging through the gates and onto surrounding sidewalks and streets. Sheriff's deputies in riot gear arrived and over bullhorns ordered them back to class. Most refused.

A Coca-Cola delivery truck happened to drive up, and students began grabbing bottles and hurling them at deputies. Wading into the fray were the Brown Berets, who had planned to offer students protection. Sanchez later boasted that he outran two deputies "chasing after me with batons waving."

The next day, it was Vickie Castro's mission to occupy the Lincoln principal while cohorts fanned out across campus and encouraged students to leave school. She pretended to be an applicant for a teacher's assistant position and peppered the principal with questions.

"I held the principal hostage for 20 minutes while one worried staffer after another rushed into his office to whisper the worsening news in his ear," she recalled with a

chuckle. "Finally, he said, 'Sorry, but I really have to go.' Then I drove to Roosevelt High for more action."

When Vickie Castro pulled up at her alma mater, an administrator recognized her. "Vickie, if you come on campus I'll have you arrested," she said. "Turn around. Now."

She drove off — for the other side of the campus, and joined other activists inciting students to walk. A brief clash with police resulted in several arrests. Students walked out at Belmont the next day. Protest plans there had spread not just by word of mouth, but by messages written in marker on the grout between tiles: "Walkout. Today. 12:30."

In years to come, the Eastside would be the site of protests decrying the Vietnam War and immigration policy. But these early walkouts were about education. Students carried American flags and signs reading, "We demand schools that teach," "School not prison" and "We are not 'dirty Mexicans.'"

During one day of protest, a heavy rain broke out. At Lincoln, a few of the demonstrators who braved the downpour noticed that the water streaming down Sal Castro's face was mixed with tears of pride.

The unrest continued for about a week, with protests erupting at a few other campuses — even two junior highs — not originally included in the walkout plans. At a raucous school board meeting 10 days into the protests, students presented 36 demands. Some seemed excessive: Only pass/fail grades. Student lounges with jukeboxes. Mexican dishes in the cafeteria prepared by local mothers.

Others were very basic: Smaller classes. New libraries. More bilingual counselors, teachers and principals. Improved testing to distinguish between a lack of English proficiency and lack of intelligence. More lessons on Mexican American culture, art and history. And no corporal punishment.

The school board agreed outright to two of the demands — more bilingual personnel and smaller classes. Generally, however, the district said it was already doing what the students asked, or wanted to comply but lacked funds.

In the walkouts' aftermath, the organizers basked in support from high-profile leaders, including Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy, who made time to congratulate some students on the tarmac at Santa Monica Airport while in California to meet Cesar Chavez.

Some educators supported the students, but quietly. "We were secretly guided behind the scenes by sympathetic teachers and administrators who used us, in a way, as their own vehicles for change," Vickie Castro recalled. "They even helped me write speeches I gave after the blowouts during meetings with school officials."

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>
> **— Vickie Castro**

But the walkouts also unleashed ugly emotions. As an example of the attitudes Mexican American students faced, community leaders cited an essay Richard C. Davis, a wood shop instructor at Lincoln, published that spring in the school's faculty publication.

Declaring that "most of the Mexican Americans have never had it so good," he wrote: "Before the Spanish came, he was an Indian grubbing in the soil and after the Spanish came, he was a slave. It seems to me that America must be a very desirable place, witness the number of 'wetbacks' and migrants both legal and illegal from Mexico…."

He went on: "When it comes to going to school — free and the best in the world — he (the Mexican-American) is passive. Absenteeism is his culture, his way of life — always *manana* maybe he will get an education — *manana*, when it comes to repairing his home, controlling childbirth, planning for tomorrow, he is passive."

Law enforcement responded with undercover operations, raids and arrests. In June, authorities rounded up 13 activists, who were indicted by a grand jury on charges

including conspiracy in having planned the walkouts. Each faced 66 years in prison.

Among those indicted were Sanchez and Sal Castro, who was the only teacher to publicly participate and back students' complaints to news media and school district officials.

He lost his job but was eventually reinstated after months of protests by Eastside parents. Castro had employment, but was bounced around to different campuses and made a substitute before finally landing at Belmont as a teacher. The indictments against the "Eastside 13" were struck down by an appeals court in 1970.

A year after the walkouts, UCLA's enrollment of Mexican Americans soared from 100 to 1,900. Over the decades, college enrollment increased from 2% to 25% nationwide. Chicano studies programs were founded at colleges and universities across the nation. More Mexican Americans also entered the ranks of vice principals and principals in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

But perhaps the walkouts' greatest accomplishment was fostering in the Mexican American community a sense of possibility — the realization that a just cause sometimes requires speaking up.

"Until that day, it never crossed my mind that Garfield High was run-down, overcrowded and lagging behind public schools in wealthier white neighborhoods," said Rodriguez, who later became a prize-winning columnist at the San Jose Mercury News. "All that changed after the blowouts."

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— Joseph Rodriguez

Mexican American parents who had never attended a school board meeting watched their children addressing the board. Rodriguez recalled that his father was initially appalled by the protests, then decided the students were right.

Vickie Castro recounted a dinner table confrontation with her own father. "My dad stared down at me," she said, "and announced, *'Mija*, I never thought you'd grow up to be a communist.'

"I'm no communist, Dad!" she responded. "There's something terribly wrong with our schools. Our future is at stake."

She went on to become a teacher, principal and a Los Angeles school board member. But her role in the walkouts caused a rift in her family. One cousin, a sheriff's deputy, refused to speak to her for years.

As a middle school principal in East L.A. many years later, her radical past collided head on with the establishment world of education when three students walked out of class because they couldn't access their grades during a teacher's work stoppage. She suspended them.

"I never thought I'd be the other side of a walkout situation," she said with a laugh. "But that situation wasn't at all the same."

Later, she was approached by a group of Eastside high school students, many of them flanked by their parents, who were fed up because the campus cafeteria was serving too many burritos, and not enough variety.

"I had to turn around and stifle a chuckle," she said. "Once upon a time, I fought hard for those burritos!"

This year LAUSD is remembering the walkouts with seminars, instructional materials and an arts festival. The Plaza de Cultura y Artes in downtown will host a major exhibition on the walkouts' legacy. Many screenings are planned of "Walkout," a movie about those fiery days produced by Moctesuma Esparza, who was one of the Eastside 13.

The dropout rates at Eastside high schools have improved dramatically since 1968 — Garfield, 13%; Roosevelt, 28%; and Lincoln, 21%. But they remain far higher than those at affluent Westside campuses, such as Malibu High, where it hovers at about 5%.

"We've come a long way," Vickie Castro said, "but there's still a lot of work to do."

Some of that work is being carried out at a campus just west of downtown. It used to be Belmont Middle School. In 2010 it got a new name: Salvador B. Castro Middle School.

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UPDATES:

FOR THE RECORD

8:45 a.m.: An earlier version of this article referred to the La Piranha Coffee Shop. It was the La Piranya Coffee Shop.

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Louis Sahagún is a former Los Angeles Times staff writer who covered issues ranging from religion, culture and the environment to crime, politics and water. He was on

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