



First in a series that runs Wednesdays through Oct. 11.

The year the students walked out

Film shows the effect of 1968 action by Mexican-American teens in East L.A.

Phillip Zonkel, Staff writer

Posted: 09/20/2006 12:00:00 AM PDT

'WALKOUT'

What: Screening of HBO film about 1968 Mexican-American students' civil rights action **Where:** Carpenter Performing Arts Center, Cal State Long Beach campus, 6200 E. Atherton St., Long Beach **When:** 7 p.m. Thursday; 6 p.m. reception with cast members and protest participants **Admission:** Free, but reservations required **Information:** (562) 985-5136 or advocacy@csulb.edu

IN 1968, PAULA CRISOSTOMO and her classmates at Lincoln High School in East Los Angeles were frustrated with the school conditions and the racist behavior they had been enduring from teachers, guidance counselors and school officials.

Students were forbidden to speak Spanish; those who did were punished with paddlings in front of classmates. Schools taught a curriculum that largely ignored or denied Mexican-American history, and Chicano students were steered away from college by counselors and school officials and toward menial labor or the secretarial pool.

"We recognized we were getting the short end of the stick with our education," says Crisostomo, now 56.

The students made several requests to improve the schools, including a list of 39 demands, but school officials ignored them.

"Our requests for reform were not new. Community groups had been asking school administrators for reform, but getting nowhere," she says. "Nobody would help us and we had to do something dramatic to get their attention."

On March 6, students from Lincoln and four other East Los Angeles high schools

Advertisement





(Belmont, Garfield, Roosevelt and Wilson) protested unequal conditions in the Los Angeles Unified School District with dramatic walkouts. Crisostomo led the walkouts at Lincoln.

The protests soon spread to 15 additional high schools, including ones in Huntington Park, Venice and Hollywood. In all, 22,000 students walked out.

The HBO film "Walkout," which is based on those walkouts, and the documentary "Chicano! History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement," screen Thursday at the Carpenter Performing Arts Center on the campus of Cal State Long Beach. The film, directed by Edward James Olmos, was shot on location in East Los Angeles in 2005 and stars Michael Pena as Lincoln High School teacher Sal Castro and Alexa Vega ("Spy Kids") as Crisostomo.

"For the Mexican community, the student walkouts are the most significant civil rights movement of the past 50 years," says Armando Vazquez-Ramos, professor of Chicano and Latino Studies at Cal State Long Beach. "It triggered the Chicano rights movement."

TEEN LEADERS

In early 1967, the seeds for the walkouts were sown. The best and brightest Mexican students in the Los Angeles Unified School District attended the Chicano Youth Leadership Conferences, where they were encouraged by the charismatic Castro and others to take pride in their Chicano culture and become leaders in their schools.

The students shared similar complaints about deplorable school conditions and humiliating treatment from school officials, teachers and guidance counselors and, after attending the conference, student groups from Roosevelt, Wilson, Lincoln, Garfield and Belmont high schools organized to push for change.

Castro, now 72, says he encouraged the students to not only fight for improvements in their high schools, but also stressed the importance of higher education and equal access to college enrollment information.

The dropout rate for Mexican high school students was 56 percent, and UCLA's Mexican student body was less than 100 out of more than 20,000 students.

"It's important to take risks for high education. Civilization doesn't move without education. It gets stagnant and abused," says Castro, who now coordinates the Chicano

Advertisement





Youth Leadership Conferences.

First, student leaders surveyed Chicano students' attitudes toward school and education, and from the results drew up a list of demands to present to the school board: build more schools, expand libraries, end corporal punishment, teach American history showing contributions from Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, bilingual education ("education of a Mexican child from K through 12 to his fullest potential"), etc.

The school board brushed aside the students with a series of bureaucratic delays.

"As we went through our demands, we realized these people didn't recognize us or value us," Crisostomo says. "That frustrated us even more.

"We weren't doing anything frivolous. We wanted a better education," she says. "But we were told over and over that we were not good enough and smart enough. But saying that we knew we were better than that was powerful."

STAGING A PROTEST

As a result, the student leadership decided to take direct action. Castro enlisted help

from local Chicano college students, including CSULB's Vazquez-Ramos, to be a front line of defense between students and the police.

The first walkout was premature. Students from Wilson High School walked out after the school principal canceled a performance of the play "Barefoot in the Park."

Then on March 6, Belmont, Garfield, Lincoln and Roosevelt high schools followed suit.

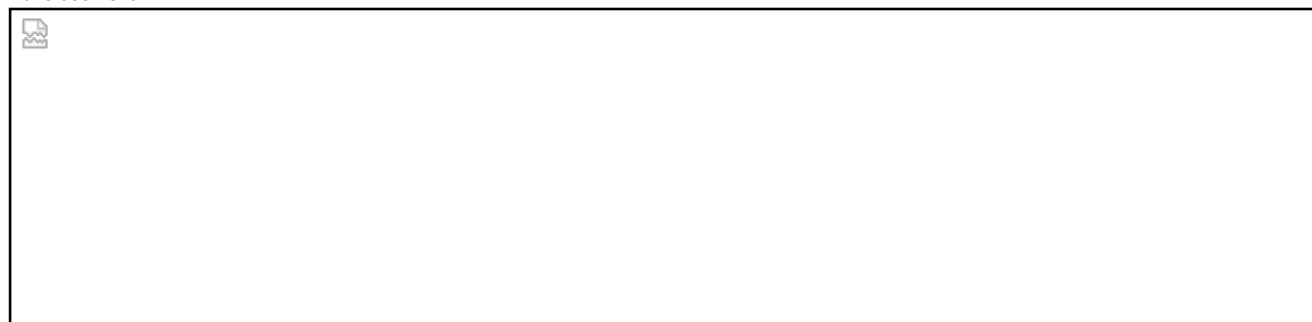
"The kids were alone and fearful," Castro says. "The parents were not supportive. School officials called parents to scare them into having their kids quit the protests. But the kids still went out.

"The real heroic part was the kids saw the killing and the tanks on TV in 1965 from the Watts Riots. In spite of that, they went, regardless of the consequences."

The first day of protests was tolerated, but on day two, authorities lost patience and the police were called in to disperse the peaceful demonstrators at Roosevelt and Belmont high schools.

"What were we doing wrong?" says Crisostomo, director of government and community relations at Occidental College.

Advertisement



"We wanted a better education. We were trying to stage a peaceful protest. I learned in a government class that it was legal to do that."

THE EAST L.A. 13

Almost three months later, 12 students and Castro (known as the "East L.A. 13") were arrested and charged with 15 counts of conspiracy to disrupt public schools and 15 counts of conspiracy to disturb the peace. Though the charges were misdemeanors, they were elevated to felonies.

Four years later, a state appeals court exonerated the "East L.A. 13" and dismissed the charges based on freedom of speech.

The school board agreed to some of the students' demands (open access to restrooms during lunch hours, an end to corporal punishment), but many of the larger education issues (class size, more schools) remain unfilled to this day.

Crisostomo says the entire ordeal caused enormous personal pain for the students. They were ostracized by fellow students, rejected by friends, teachers, parents and denied information about college from guidance counselors.

"But it was worth it. We changed. That was the big accomplishment," Crisostomo says. "I'm proud of my actions. We found our voice and our strength."

So did other students. In 1969, UCLA's enrollment of Mexican students jumped from less than 100 to 1,900.

However, recent statistics, which some people have disputed, find that Latinos have the nation's largest high school and college dropout rate. The numbers have raised debate about the quality of education minority students are receiving.

"If the school board listened to the demands 38 years ago, we wouldn't have the problems we have today," Castro says. "They're willing to give us a Home Depot or Target education but nothing more."

Phillip Zonkel (562) 499-1258 or phillip.zonkel@presstelegram.com

Advertisement

