

## Las Marchas de Del Rio

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In the summer of 1968 I was named supervisor trainer of the brand-new VISTA Minority Mobilization Project. Up to then VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) had been the domestic peace Corps which had created such interest in middle class white students to go and help other countries. The VISTA program was basically recruiting white middle class college students and recent graduates to go work in poor neighborhoods around the country. In my last teaching year at San Felipe H.S. in the now-defunct San Felipe ISD from September of 1967 to May of 1968 I had made connections with several VISTAs working in the San Felipe barrios. I even brought some of them into my classroom to work with my students on collages and art projects which I was introducing into my Junior English classes.

That year I had also worked on the campaign to elect the first Mexican American mayor of Del Rio, Dr. Alfredo Gutierrez. Unbeknownst to me he was a conservative Republican but I was very naïve about politics that time although the cultural movement was already motivating me to support Chicano candidates of any ilk. Dr. Gutierrez had recommended me for the VMMP supervisor position as had the local VISTAs. His brother, Antonio Gutierrez, assistant superintendent of the San Felipe ISD had recruited me in 1964 to come teach in Del Rio. None of them or the other school officials, nor did I for that matter, expect me to become the 'radical' that eventually had me ostracized by the power structures in Del Rio.

The Vista minority mobilization project, a small pilot effort, recruited locals to be both the VISTA volunteers and also the supervisors and trainers, was situated in five communities: the lower Rio Grande Valley, Laredo, San Antonio, El Paso and Del Rio. The program was part of the Office of Economic Opportunity part President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. The program officer in Austin was Gonzalo Barrientos who eventually was elected as a senator in the Texas legislature.

The summer of 1968 at the initial training in San Antonio, under the leadership Gil Murillo, we met the key organizers of MAYO: Joe Angel Gutierrez, Nacho Perez and Mario Compean, who was also the VMMP supervisor/trainer in San Antonio. Among other consultants Gil brought in was Genaro Garcia, who became a strong friend and partner. Genaro, together with Roberto Flores (then a Franciscan priest) and I eventually developed a retreat "El Curso de la Raza Unida" which we used as a leadership and movement building training event from 1970 – 75. But that's another story.

Some of the two VISTA volunteers under me were my ex-students. We learned about the MAYO organization and Efrain Barrera and I decided that we would start a group in Del Rio as soon as we returned.

I began to train and encourage the VISTAs to work in the barrios and identify needs and develop leadership. Instead of having an office in the downtown area where the Community Action Agency, the local sponsoring organization, was located we rented an empty small grocery store and set up shop. The VISTA included some older folk as well as the younger college-age volunteers. The MAYO group was soon organized, mostly from ex-students of mine. We connected to the state organization and I had correspondence with state leaders including Jose Angel Gutierrez. I took representatives of our local unit to state conferences and meetings. I was a sponsor but not a member because it was for high school and college age youth. The San Felipe group became part of the state network. At the next statewide election in San Antonio, I took several representatives as voting members. That year there was a tie between Carlos Guerra (RIP) and Mario Compean and I counseled our reps to vote for Mario.

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As the MAYOs became more public the local authorities were very concerned. I was approached about the issues but paid very little attention to their warnings. In the early months of 1968 the Community Action Agency board took action and called a meeting to investigate the doings of the Vista Minority Mobilization Project, the supervisor/trainer and the relationship to the 'radical group' MAYO.

I faced a committee (kangaroo Court) at a public meeting and was castigated for introducing radical politics into the community. The committee voted to shut down the program and asked that it no longer operate in Del Rio. They were shown proof of correspondence between myself and Jose Angel and others testified that we had meetings at the 'tiendita' and that some people were afraid of the MAYOs.

When the program was stopped, a protest march was planned. A legal march could not be held without a city permit which we didn't think we could get. The only kind of procession allowed without a permit was a funeral. Rusty Sanchez had an old hearse as his means of transportation and it was determined to have a burial for a dead rabbit named Justicia. A few supporters from around the state came into town for the 'funeral procession' and it was stopped just as it was starting. A large group was arrested. Mike Gonzalez, a local lawyer, supporter and G I Forum officer, brought in another lawyer friend to help with the case. It was thrown out and everyone quickly released because the city ordinance on marches had not been properly promulgated and was null and void.

Word spread statewide about these events and another protest was called for: a much larger and longer march on Palm Sunday that April. I don't remember there being any objection by the city for that event. By then the state leaders of LULAC, American GI Forum and other allies were alerted and called for mass protest. The *Marcha de Del Rio* took place, starting at the Convention Center in the predominantly white part of town, pausing at the county courthouse to post a declaration on the doors, and continued all the way to a park where three priests (including Fr. Roberto Flores) co-celebrated Mass. Even though there were armed men inside the court house there was no violence and such luminaries as Dr. Hector Garcia, founder of the GI Forum walked all the way. MAYO was given great prominence and it was clear that the older groups were now in the background. With the national press in attendance we got nationwide notice.

The state MAYO leadership were somewhat distressed because these events happened too soon. The group that had the newest and greenest supervisor had now leapt into prominence. I was pretty much ostracized by the families and local leaders in San Felipe who had previously seen me as a popular teacher and now considered me a 'communist' 'rabble-rouser' and someone who poisoned the minds of young people.

We started a group *BASTA BARRIOS in Service To America*. The hope was that through donations we could continue the organizing that had begun through the volunteers and the MAYOs. I was only left with a few young people supporting our efforts. The VISTAs lost their jobs. That winter I attended the first statewide MAYO conference at La Lomita, just south of Mission Texas and there decided to move to the valley to start an independent Chicano college. But that's another story.