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[photographs of participants of the East Side Walkouts across the top of the page]

Then and Now – Protest figures: Robert Rodriguez, left, 1968 Lincoln student; Mita Cuaron, Garfield student; Louis Torres, Lincoln editor; Sal Castro, teacher and protest leader.

No Regrets, Chicano Students Who Walked Out Say

'68 Protest Brought Better Education, Most Believe

By Frank del Olmo. Times Staff Writer.

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Robert Rodriguez counsels and coaches high school students in Bakersfield. Mita Cuaron is a nurse. John Ortiz is an analyst for the state Personnel Board. Bobby Verdugo is a bus driver.

In March 1968, they were juniors and seniors at five heavily Chicano high schools – Garfield, Lincoln Roosevelt, Wilson, and Belmont – where they helped lead a major student strike. The so-called East L.A. blowouts.

The protests were staged to demand better education for Mexican-American students in the Los Angeles city schools, and they focused national attention, for the first time, on urban Chicanos as a vocal, assertive minority group.

"It was a definite break with the past," says Mexican-American historian, Rudy Acuna. "Before the walkouts, all through the Civil Rights Movement, people said Chicanos didn't do things the way the blacks did. But when they saw the results of the blowouts, there was no turning back."

On a more immediate level, the walkouts changed the way educator in Los Angles, and elsewhere in the Southwest, perceived their Chicano students.

Dr. Julian Nava, another historian who in 1963 was in his first year on the Los Angeles Board of Education, said after the protest, "The schools will not be the same hereafter."

[text callout:]The walkout changed educators' perceptions of Chicano students.

Some Chicano activists would complain that educational progress is still coming too slowly in the predominantly Mexican-American schools. But there is no denying that, in Los Angeles at least, the conditions of Chicano schools are better than they were in the spring of 1968.

That year, according to educational researchers, the dropout rates for Mexican-American high school students in East Los Angeles were among the highest in the nation – 57% at Garfield, 45% at Roosevelt, 39% at Lincoln, and 35% at Belmont.

"Anyone with eyes" could see that the schools on the East Side were run down, according to Alicia Sandoval, a former Roosevelt teacher who is writing a book about the blowouts.

""I didn't have enough books for all my students or even enough desks," she recalls. "I had kids sit on the floor in my classes."

For years Mexican-American reformers has been working quietly to improve the situation. In 1963 a special committee had warned the Los Angeles Board of Education that major improvements were needed "if the schools are to meet the needs of Mexican-American schoolchildren."

So in retrospect it is not surprising that when a younger, more militant generation of community activists came to the fore late in the turbulent 1960s, they focused on the schools as symbols of the problems facing Mexican-Americans.

And in the high schools of the East Side, these activities found many eager, if unsophisticated, young people willing to join in their protests.

"We didn't have to be exceedingly socially aware or politically astute to know that we attended comparatively crummy schools," says Louis Torres, 27, today a writer and filmmaker, then editor of the Lincoln High School newspaper.

"The classrooms were inexcusably overcrowded. Effective counseling was nonexistent," Torres says. "And the textbooks and curriculum were at best insensitive to Chicanos, and at worst racist."

"We all knew this," Torres says. "At the time we probably couldn't articulate it with too much precision, but we knew."

Although Torres did not help plan the walkouts, when they began on a sunny Wednesday morning, he joined in.

Almost 4,000 persons were involved when the blowouts reached their peak March 8, a rainy Friday when students marched off their campuses to an East Side park for a protest rally.

Today, no one denies that non-students were involved in the planning that preceded the protests, and that the blowouts were not as spontaneous as some leaders claimed they were at the time.

And Torres admits many students may have taken part merely as a youthful prank. But he adds that "most of us felt we were genuinely making some sort of a statement."

The student demands ranged from the mundane to the profound: bilingual-bicultural education, Mexican-American studies and more Chicano teachers; better school facilities; liberalized dress codes. And Mexican food in cafeterias.

Thirteen activists, including Lincoln High School teacher Sal Castro, were indicted by the county Grand Jury a few months after the protests. They were charged with conspiracy in having planned the demonstrations.

The indictments were struck down wo years later by an appeals court, long after Castro had become a symbol of the blowouts, and his legal case a cause celebre to Chicanos.

Castro was the only teacher to publicly join in the walkouts, and to join the students in expressing their grievances to the news media and to school district officials.

Jesse Franco, a Mexican-American who was a vice-principal at Lincoln in 1968, admits today she was embarrassed and angered by the blowouts and Castro's role in leading them.

"It was unexpected and put me in a very awkward position," says Mrs. Franco, ow the principal at Garfield. "There I was trying to get kids to stay in school and being called a 'sell-out' It was very hard for me at the time.

"I disagreed with Sal because I could no relate to what he was talking about," she says. "I had never experienced prejudice as a student or a teacher."

Today, Mrs. Franco says the walkouts were beneficial. At Garfield, where the dropout rate was over 50% 10 years ago, more than 50% of last year's graduating seniors went on at least to start college.

"There had been some change before the walkouts, but they helped speed it up," she says. "It probably had to be done."

Because of Castro's participation at Lincoln, many of the walkout leaders there also were campus leaders. But at Garfield, where there was little faculty sympathy or support, the blowout leaders were the nonconformists of the student body, according to John Ortiz, a Garfield student at the time, now a state personnel analyst and college history instructor.

"Back then, people said you'd never go to college, never amount to anything, unless you were in the Knights or on the football team," he says with some lingering resentment. "I not only went to college, but now I'm teaching at one."

Ortiz likens the walkouts to the civil rights movement in the Deep South, saying Chicano students were "disenfranchised" by the educational system like Southern blacks were by the political system.

"The blacks were disenfranchised by law," he says, "We were disenfranchised by not being given the same resources to compete in the outside world that other students were given.

"The things we were demanding, like bilingual education, are now considered legitimate," he added.

Unlike many other former walkout leaders, Ortiz does not believe the changes made in the educational system since the protests have been substantive.

There is a trace of bitterness in his voice when he talks of adults who he believes have unjustly profited from the student protests, whose livelihood depends on the new educational bureaucracy created to respond to Chicano demands.

But not Sal Castro, says Ortiz, "Sal Castro was sincere and honest. He just might be the major casualty of the blowouts."

While many other teachers with whom Sal Castro entered the Los Angeles schools system in the 1960s are now administrators or specialists, he is regularly passed over for promotions and special assignments he seeks.

Castro has heard from several school district sources over the ensuing years, that at least some Los Angeles school administrators have blackballed him.

Castro returned to Lincoln briefly following the blowouts, but was suspended from the classroom following his indictment. After the charges were dropped he bounced for several years through the district, from North Hollywood to Gardena, until he was allowed to teach again at a predominantly Chicano high school, Belmont.

There, just as at Lincoln 10 years ago, Castro is a popular social studies teacher, who mixes easily with his students, and seems to take a sincere joy in work.

Although he may never advance in the city school system, Castro has turned down offers to teach elsewhere, usually at the college level.

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[photograph of police and protestors]

[caption] Face to Face – Sheriff deputies keep eye on Garfield High School students who boycotted classes in 1968 education protests. Times photo by Joe Kennedy

[photograph of protestors gathered to hear a speaker]

[caption] Shouting demands – Freddie Resendez, a demonstration leader, addresses students at 1968 walkout at Lincoln High School. Times photo

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75,000 Employees in Vital Jobs: Faceless Force Serves L. A. County

By Sid Bernstein. Times Staff Writer

If you happen to be born a Loa Angeles County USC Medical Center, the first person you get to know might be Sylvia Petrone.

She is the registered nurse in charge of the sprawling taxpayer-supported medical center's high-risk obstetrics unit, where 14,000 babies are born each year.

And from anywhere in the sprawling 4,083-square-mile area of Los Angeles County, someone might one day face an ambulance ride to the county's major hospital of last resort.

At that point, the 28-year-old Mrs. Petrone or one of her colleagues on the 7,000-person staff of the Medical Center could become the most important person in that patient's life.

These county workers accept as a simple fact that they staff one of the largest public hospitals in the nation.

But when they have time to reflect, as Mrs. Petrone and others did recently, they find it curious that the county's huge work force remains virtually faceless.

At a current total of 75,000 (more than the 1970 population of Reno, Nev.), the Los Angeles County work force provides many of the most vital services used by 7 million residents.

Some services are obvious. Property tax appraisal and collection, for instance. Others are not. Take, for example, the county worker who spends his time trying to outwit coyotes in the Antelope Valley.

For the 1 million residents of unincorporated areas, where there are no city governments to provide the services people have come to expect, the county provides law enforcement, fire protection, planning, recreation, libraries and road maintenance.

The county has an annual budget this year of $3.6 billion – more than most U. S. states, more than many countries. Still, other governments are more visible.

To many members of the public it serves, the county work force is just another bureaucracy – a bureaucracy that can be rude at public counters and leave telephone calls on hold.

Nearly everyone has some such bureaucratic horror story to tell at a cocktail party. In any work force so-

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[photograph of a nurse tending to a patient on a gurney]

[caption] On duty – Nurse Sylvia Petrone checks blood pressure of a patient at County-USC Hospital. Times photo by Bill Varic.