

Dr. Leo Carrillo: Bucking the System by Dr. Nancy S. Vera

Dr. Leonardo Carrillo was born in Benavides, Texas on November 21, 1944, and has spent the majority of his life in Corpus Christi. As Dr. Carrillo begins to recount his life, tears well up in his eyes. He begins to weep intensely when he expresses his love, gratitude and appreciation for his father. He says that he had the gentlest father in the whole world who was a beautiful example of kindness, patience and devotion. Dr. Carrillo's father was his hope for a wonderful life. His father gave Dr. Carrillo a knife and taught him how to shoot a gun when he was seven, things that may sound uncouth for the mainstream. He taught him how to shoot a rabbit with the gun and how to skin the rabbit with the knife. Dr. Carrillo says that these were life lessons in respect and responsibility – in understanding the value of life. “My father taught me what the knife and the gun were for and, as a result of these lessons, I never had that lust that I see in other people for shooting things.” Dr. Carrillo's father was his guardian and his guide when he was a child and it was not until he became an adult that he and his father became friends. His father died about 18 years ago.

Dr. Carrillo is the youngest of five siblings - three brothers and one sister. “My sister and brothers were punished for being mean to me and so my parents had a special place in the family for me. I enjoyed being the spoiled brat, but it didn't last too long. I don't consider myself privileged anymore.” Dr. Carrillo says the family does not enjoy the closeness they once had. As with many families, Dr. Carrillo's parents were the center of family gatherings and when they died, a vacuum in the family developed. The vacuum grew when one of his siblings died and another, with whom he has no communication, was admitted into a nursing home out of state. Dr. Carrillo says he does not necessarily miss the family's vibrant and pronounced gatherings because he thinks that families need to move beyond that. “I see other generations coming up

and maybe baptisms are now on a different level. It's a different situation. You may not get invitations to every single one of your nieces', nephews' or cousins' special occasions, but you know you're thought about." Dr. Carrillo, by default he says, finds himself as the most influential of the family group even though he is the youngest of his siblings. The second generation of his family comes to him for advice, guidance and support. Likewise, he asserts that he knows his identity and purpose in life because of what he has learned and still learns from his family.

Dr. Carrillo says he is not the brightest among his siblings in terms of the world or intellect even though he has had the most formal education of all. He says he had wonderful teachers and professors and met some good leaders and role models as he progressed through school. During his childhood, Dr. Carrillo loved school and was an avid reader. He was amazed with the world around him and first read science books. He was a member of the bookworm association at the La Retama Public Library in Corpus Christi, Texas. However, it was at Roy Miller High School where Dr. Carrillo was disheartened when he discovered that there were "special students" who surrounded him.

He attended Miller High School when Saxet Heights, a neighborhood located in North Corpus Christi, was a prominent Anglo neighborhood. He remembers specifically that there were 100 people in the marching band and that there were two buses for Mexicans and one bus for Anglo students. Mexicans were not allowed in the Anglo bus and it was only when there was trouble on the Anglo bus that the band director decided to integrate the group. Ironically, the Anglos, Dr. Carrillo says, were the ones who would not stay in their section (sex-tion). The boys rode with boys and the girls would ride with girls but in the Anglo bus, the students would switch around. "Mr. Bailey would get upset because a girl was sitting next to a boy. One day he

got so fed up that he divided the Anglos among the three buses. Ten were assigned to each bus. When this occurred, the Anglo mothers became incensed because they were concerned that their Anglo daughters were going to get pregnant riding in the Mexican bus.” In spite of the issue at hand, the bus changes had a positive aspect for Dr. Carrillo. For the first time, he established a friendship with an Anglo friend, Bill Whitener, that still exists today. “Somehow, the whole racist card just didn’t picture in with him. He was a very, very hard-nosed Baptist and I was a Catholic and we still were able to rise above all that – rise above ethnic backgrounds – to become very good friends. It was then that I realized what racism was and what it didn’t have to be.”

After graduating from high school in 1963, Dr. Carrillo enrolled at Del Mar Community College. He was a “C” student at Del Mar and he blames that on the oppression that existed at the College during that time. He remembers an English teacher at Del Mar who said that the problem with Mexican Americans was they needed to think in Spanish so that they could write in English. “I wondered on what she based that statement because she was a monolingual of English or, as said in linguistic terms, she was an Anglophone.” He took issue with this statement on a personal level. “I know when I think in English that I write in English. When I speak Spanish, I think in Spanish. I’m sorry, but she was wrong and she was casting all the brown faces in the light that somehow our problems were a result of thinking in Spanish. It was a myth and I’m glad I don’t hear about it anymore.” He left Corpus Christi to pursue a bachelors, masters and a doctorate degree from St. Louis University in St. Louis, Missouri. They were degrees that were unavailable in this city at that time. “Even if those degrees would have been available, they would not have been open to me as a Mexican-American.” At the St. Louis University, Dr. Carrillo became an exemplary student. He is very thankful that his dissertation

advisor for his doctorate degree was someone who really “kicked him in the butt” and sent him into the next century.

After his doctorate, he spent his entire teaching career at the university in Corpus Christi and he considers himself an academic. He says he has no choice but to be a teacher and that he knows nothing else beyond that. He believes his social life suffered because he was an academic beyond full time.

Dr. Leo Carrillo is satisfied with his life accomplishments and he thinks that his 31 years of teaching at the university were good. He is happy with himself and he knows that he dedicated most of his time for others. During his retirement, he volunteers mainly with the church and he is satisfied with his life. He adds that he is still in the process of achieving success. “I’m not finished yet and it’s like the little child who was asked, ‘have you lived here all your life?’ and he answers, ‘not yet.’ I feel like I haven’t accomplished anything yet. I’m working on things and I don’t have a set goal but I know a process, a very good process, with which I want to deal. In fact, Dr. Carrillo says he has about four books in him that he wants to write. He is almost finished with a book on the Nino Fidencio, a folk saint from Northern Mexico who lived from 1898-1938. He also wants to write another on the oral culture in the Mexican American experience that is original research based on the writings of Milman Parry and Albert Lord. He has conducted extensive research on the corridos, especially those of South Texas and on studying the genealogies and histories of Mexican- American families in South Texas. However, much of this research was lost to mold at Texas A & M University – Corpus Christi.

“I’ve met some very, very fine people both in my professional life and in my retired life. And they’re not people you read about in the newspaper. They’re people with whom one should spend time. They’re people worthy of your attention and time.” These people that Dr. Carrillo

talks about influence his life in many ways. He sees his friends as mirrors of himself because they remind him of who he is and what his weaknesses are and on what he needs to improve.

“When I see people, especially the people who are older than I am, there are many of them in my church and they are quite polished. Very polished. They understand that as much as you think you’ve done, as much as you’ve accomplished, you’re still rough around the edges. There is still polishing that can be done. And I’m talking personality wise. It’s a wonderful experience to be alive.” On a more global scale, Dr. Carrillo admires Martin Luther King because as a civil rights activist he shaped minority consciousness as a way to change the status quo. He also admires the revolutionist Che Guevara for his affirmation and will to die for his convictions; Camilo Torres, a guerrilla priest who evangelized and acted on gospels; Gustavo Gutierrez, who changed the role of ethics religion and praxis in liberation theology; Paulo Freire, who shaped education for the third world offering liberation for all who chose to be conscious of his/her surroundings; Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a religious who was fully aware of the needs of the human family and willing to work to change whatever she could; Tony Orendain, leader of the Texas Farm Workers Union; and, Octavio Paz, a writer of the Mexican experience.

Dr. Carrillo’s involvement with the community is extensive. He has been a board member and chair for the Nueces County Mental Health-Mental Retardation Board and on the National Board of Directors for *Canto Al Pueblo*, which dealt with Mexican-American Chicano Arts Celebrations. He is currently involved with the Temple Park Neighborhood Association, the neighborhood in which he lives, and he spent many hours working on the Center for Hispanic Arts. “We started out with The Center for Chicano Arts, Sciences and Humanities (C for CASH); and when the 80s became the decade of the Hispanic, we changed to the Center for Hispanic Arts, which is now under the auspices of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.” He considers

his engagement in the community his civic duty and he has made numerous appearances in schools, especially on the west side, making presentations about Mexican-American heritage. He has also had speaking engagements at the university level and has been involved as a consultant for many projects. One project he mentioned was located in Beeville, Texas, a town about 57 miles northwest of Corpus Christi, where there was a creek that ran right down the center of Beeville and seemed to divide the community between Mexicans and Anglos. He became involved with Texas Commission for the Humanities (TCH) that tried to bring more cohesiveness to the community. He also makes international appearances at places such as the Spanish legislature in Madrid, Spain and speaks regarding the Spanish presence and experience in South Texas. The Spanish forgot about their presence here, he says, until the caravels came here in 1492. He has also been involved internationally with the Mexican Traditional Folk Medicine housed in Mexico City and he has traveled to Cuba where he received the Martin de la Cruz Award. Dr. Carrillo has traveled Mexico and the United States extensively.

Personal insight has always helped Dr. Carrillo succeed in his life and career. In Corpus Christi, he sees a lot of inactivity among leaders and citizens. He states that he finds himself on boards and different organizations that are more like social clubs and he wishes they accomplished something. "It doesn't matter what we do, just do something. It doesn't matter. If you don't like it, do something. If you like it, do something, but don't just sit and point fingers. That's not doing – thinking is not enough. Thinking about how much you hate it or how much you love it is not enough. Do something." While he was organizing for the Center for Hispanic Arts, he remembers the board would get in a position where some wanted something done, the others did not, and he said he wouldn't care what they wanted just so that they moved to get something done. He says this inactivity is prevalent everywhere in the community and that it is

not just in the Mexican-American Community. “Corpus Christi is a do-nothing community, but I believe that many things in today’s culture contribute to complacency, as opposed to 25 years ago. Twenty five years ago, we did not have 1,000 channels on TV, or DVR’s available – just in case you missed something. Channels are 24 hours a day in news, religion, cooking, shopping, sports, travel, learning movies of all types and many others. In the end, one feels that even though one has watched TV at every opportunity, you’ve missed out. We have a culture that may be well informed but not doing anything to improve areas where they might be able to contribute greatly with their leadership. Many are busy working with the ultimate in electronic toys. People are aware of needs and do little except stay informed.” Carrillo believes the culture will get worse but hopes that a backlash will occur in society where everybody either gets tired of their toys, or organizations start to create moratoriums on watching TV and institute activities like “Discussion Night for the Family,” “Homework without TV,” or “24 Hours without TV.”

Carrillo says that as long as someone can rationalize and explain his or her ideas, then the world should hear them. “If someone shows you the error of your ways, then change. There is nothing wrong with changing your mind. If someone says I don’t think I want to do it because XYZ, you say, ‘I really never thought about that. You know you’re right. I figure we’ll do it this other way.’ No. There’s nothing wrong with saying that’s what I thought before but now I see it a different way, you know? But do something.” He concludes that this inactivity in Corpus Christi is mainly because people do not want to be criticized, are afraid of making errors, or that they somehow feel inferior because they don’t have the right degree. Therefore, he says, they wait for that enlightened leader to come around to tell them what to do.

Dr. Carrillo says there are different styles of leadership and that Dr. Hector García obviously had his in his world of classical tradition and time or a type of classical leadership. He

says that Dr. García spoke strongly, had a good knowledge base and expressed himself well. He also says that Dr. García was not afraid to talk to presidents and governors, members of the city council, or the mayor and that he certainly did a lot of good for the community. Dr. Carrillo contrasts Dr. García's classical leadership style to his softened classical leadership style. "I'm enlightened and you're not, so let me lead you. Trust me to lead you. I may not know the answer now, but it will come to me." He then calls leadership as "it's really about me" leadership. "People meet in a committee, hear what needs to be done, rally together and do something only ultimately for a selected few."

Dr. Carrillo considers himself a unique leader because he is a leader who follows. "I lead from behind." He says that when people straggle behind or fall by the wayside, the leader fails. "Maybe we'll move slower, but we need to treat everybody with the human dignity and just because someone is not learned or poor or gawking at everybody, how can we say we are getting ahead when we are leaving people behind? How can we? It's beautiful to see a motion going forward and know that nobody is being left behind. It's almost sounds like Bush, you know. It's the Leave No Child Behind idea, but I said it long before he did. Bush talks about children, but I'm talking about movements in the community. As you lead, you've got to lead from behind - or follow from behind. And you cannot lead from behind if you're not one with the community. The moment someone feels enlightened or feels they're the savior or feels like they're the captains or the guru of the time, they make mistakes. I think we start to divide the community by thinking like this. They start to break down the essence of what they need to move the community ahead."

Dr. Carrillo recognizes that there are many positive things in the Mexican American community that are mocked or admonished. He says, "How many times have we (Mexican-

Americans) been criticized for our greasy food? Take tacos as an example. For years tacos were the Mexican food. Now, it's the latest discovery on the TV Food Network. They talk about the greatest thing they've ever discovered. Somehow our city council should learn from the Food Network that Mexicans add value to our community and that Mexicans are a modest and good people. Instead we get criticized."

Dr. Carrillo says that no matter what Mexican Americans do, they are criticized. "What if mainstream America was modest and the Mexican Americans weren't? We'd be criticized. What if we had the hamburger and they had the taco? Again, we'd be criticized. They have the hamburger and, realistically speaking, a hamburger is the cheapest way of getting the salad and the bread and the protein out to a person in less than five minutes. We call that good business. But when you look at the taco, it's a different story. It's the subject of ridicule even though the taco can have greasy things and not so greasy things and you can even add salad so that it becomes a taco salad." The point to this is that the attitudes toward Mexican-American culture need to be more accepting and positive.

He says that this community cannot move beyond this mentality because many do not recognize that they are leaving people behind. He uses the example of Leadership Corpus Christi, a group to whom he has given talks. He says that Leadership Corpus Christi is a type of mainstreaming. "...They teach this thing about going forward in the economic push and you sit there and say, 'Okay leaders, what about the people you're leaving behind? What about the immigrant who is building your universities when their children can never go there? Undocumented immigrants are building our Island University with Spanish as their main language and yet, it is ironic that their children will never be able to attend. Who is cleaning your houses, leaders of Corpus Christi? Who is caring for your children? Are you going to leave the

immigrants behind?’ Not me! I am going to be in the back of the ranks making sure nobody gets left behind. Nobody deserves to be treated less than human – Nobody!”

Dr. Carrillo returned to South Texas after graduating from St. Louis University in 1973 even though he was highly discouraged by one of his Latino friends. He was told that if he came back to Texas he would have to continually prove himself. Despite the advertence, Dr. Carrillo returned home to his neighborhood as an educator to be a role model. “...I like to see the expressions on the neighborhood children’s faces as they discover that there is such a person, a doctor, who does not give shots. For them it was inconceivable. When you look up and down my street, you still only have laborers - people who are firemen, people who work at the base and one doctor. That’s me. That’s my street. Now we have a lawyer on my street and he says that I was an inspiration to him and that’s why he chose to continue on with school. He lives next door to me as a matter of fact.”

His Latino friends’ message came close to home when, in 1973, Dr. Carrillo’s first supervisor, Dr. Miriam Wagenschein, Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities, told him “not to buck the Anglo. It is Anglo money that pays your salary.” “She said, ‘So, don’t you buck the Anglo because you have to realize that PhD or not, you’re still a Mexican.’ Her words.” Dr. Carrillo had difficulty establishing himself at the university. He shares the story that right after a major hurricane hit Corpus Christi, he found some wet curtains bundled up in one corner in an empty room and he asked if he could have them. He received the okay, he aired out the moldy curtains, and students hung them up in a room that became a new sound studio for them. When the physical plant supervisor found out, he was offended and told Dr. Carrillo to take them down. Dr. Carrillo, in turn, told Dean Wagenshien, who told him he was “still a Mexican.” Dr. Carrillo says he received no support from Dr. Wagenshien because the maintenance man was Anglo. He

says that in spite of this unfortunate matter, he met good leaders and good role models at the university, although many times he felt that he trained a few of his Anglo administrators for their jobs instead of the other way around.

Dr. Carrillo says he had good moments with Dr. García, especially in Dr. García's later years. He says that when he first taught at the University, Dr. Garcia did not care for his teaching or his style. He recalls teaching a class on Barrio Spanish (Mexican-American Spanish) because he felt that people who were working in criminal justice areas, healthcare, the financial area, needed to communicate with the people of Corpus Christi. "A class in Castilian Spanish is appropriate if you are going to a museum in Argentina or Buenos Aires. Dr. Hector was only interested in formal Spanish."

In 1995, Dr. Carrillo was a presidential fellow under Dr. Robert Furgason, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi's President at the time, and for a year Dr. Carrillo shadowed him in, what he thought, was a move to enhance Dr. Carrillo's career. However, a new supervisor was hired for the College of Arts and Humanities and Dr. Carrillo says that all of that was for nil because his new supervisor considered him passionate but mediocre because she did not believe his work had any real substance. "She was a communications person and somehow she felt that I was somewhat behind. I found it difficult to work with her and it was under her administration that something horrible happened. A mold took over our building." For thirteen years prior, mold had overtaken the building in which Dr. Carrillo's office was housed. Students complained about the mold when the building was used for dormitories, and the faculty complained when the building housed their offices. The university sprayed the building or painted throughout the course of the years in order to alleviate the odor. However, it was not until Dr. Nana Duran, one of the faculty members housed in the building, pulled her desk outside because she grew weary

of the numb limbs and incessant headaches for which she blamed the mold. As a result, the university brought in a group to study the possibility of a foreign substance in the building and they found mold between the walls. Suddenly, all of Dr. Carrillo's entire personal library and the research he had accumulated over decades were deemed contaminated. Dr. Carrillo's new supervisor reassured him that his work would be okay. However, one Monday morning, Dr. Carrillo's office key did not work on his office door. Dr. Carrillo says that Hispanic faculty were not in the "loop" so they had no idea the locks had been changed. They had no chance to remove important material like student work for the semester, the grade books, etc. The university had changed the lock without notice because they did not want the employees in the contaminated building to be affected. All of his work was in storage and he was given two weeks to decide what he was going to do with his things. He was offered the option of taking the contaminated material home or to allow its destruction. Although the mold did not affect him, he was afraid of how the mold would affect his family members, friends and pets. So, after extensive litigation, the judge ruled that Dr. Carrillo's things not be destroyed until a viable solution to the problem was found. Dr. Leo Carrillo retired from the University in 2003 and has yet to recover his research.

He believes being a Mexican American has hindered his leadership success. "I think if I were not a Mexican-American, I'd be someplace else. That is, I wouldn't be retired. I would be in a higher position than I am. So, I think it has hindered me, but it didn't stop me."

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