RK: That's kind of where I would like to start. If you could just talk about your family, what you know about your grandparents.

RF: I was born and raised in County which is just south of San Antonio in south Texas in a farming community. We were a large family and we were very, very poor. We did farming on our own farm. We had a small thirty to thirty-five acre farm, a lot of vegetables and those kinds of crops. And then we did farm work for others like the extended family for friends in that community. Finally, in the fifties there was a big drought in Texas, I guess all over the country, and we lost everything on the farm and we started migrating and we started working primarily for other people. We lost the farm that year and so we started migrating in Texas and that was when cotton was still big in the state and so we went all around Texas and then finally we hit the migrant stream and went into the Midwest and picked onions and cherries and did hoeing, the traditional things that farm workers do across the country. The one thing that I think was unusual, maybe it's not unusual, was that in our family and I can see all my uncles and aunts doing the same thing, was that they all wanted the kids educated and even though we lived in the country and we went to a country school, that was really something that my Dad's side of the family wanted. My Mother
also came from that style for some reason. In my mother's family, all of the brothers and sisters really pushed their kids to get through high school. My mother graduated from high school which was real unusual for that period of time too. It was a handful and it was a country school that they went to. There was always a push for going to school and we were five girls and one boy in my family and so obviously my dad didn't think that we could ever make it real well in the fields I think, so he said look you have to do something besides working the fields. So what happened really was that we would work around the school. We would work in the summertime before school would start and after school and weekends we worked in the fields. That's how we supported ourselves all through my school years.

RM: In the summer would you go in the streams and go North?

RF: In the summertime we would start working locally. It was like a circular thing where we would work locally, we would do all that and then we would start extending ourselves out through the south Texas fields and we would do that and then finally we would head into the Midwest. Of course, at that time in the fifties was when there was alot of cotton and cotton was labor intensive and so there was alot of local work at that time. It was only after that period of time we remember the latter part of the fifties when they quit cotton totally and made it mechanized when all of those field hands had to
really start migrating more intensely so we didn't migrate as often. We migrated once into the Midwest but most of our migration was in-state during all of the fifties.

RK: Did your grandparents live around you, did you know them?

RF: My grandparents died when I was pretty small, they died real soon. But, the history of our family actually is that my grandparents, my family, has been there in - for many, many hundreds of years and so that family was pretty stable and so the Flores family was in San Antonio for a long time and my dad says that Flores Street which is one of the major streets and one of the early streets was named after his family. I don't know if that's true or not. My mother's side, her grandfather came from Mexico. So what does that mean - I do not know how many generations that is.

RK: It's a long time. So you really had a strong attachment to the land and to the place. You had a real sense of this being your world.

RF: It's really - County and - County which is where most of the tribe is. You can still see which is my mom's side and the Flores prominent in those communities. You don't see it often, like the name is not a usual name so you see them again on the border in Roma. There is a big clan of there and so you can see the migration actually because what people do is they come to a certain point and stay there and the others come a little bit further. So, yes we have an
extended family of people in both San Antonio and which is a rural county.

RK: How important was that to you in terms of developing a sense of self and also a sense of community?

RF: That's really important. I think the fact that we had a huge family, of course it was different than it is now. I have as large a family as my mom did but we are all distributed and we are all doing different things. Being tied to a piece of property like we were and living off of it gives you a terribly different sense of family than if you are not. For example, what we do now, we aren't tied to our land to make it work and make it produce for ourselves and so we are distributed. I live here and my sister lives in Tennessee. I have a brother in and we are all doing things other than working with the property that we live on. So it is totally different. It really breaks up the family I think to a large degree.

RK: So does the fact that you have had that very labor intensive culture that kept people there, Mississippi was like that too until they started mechanizing. There are long histories of people living together in the same place.

RF: Exactly. As I was growing up on the farm, we had all of my cousins, my father's brothers and sisters living near and so we would see them. We had a real community of visiting and it was a whole different concept of relationships. It would
be a tradition to go visit and see people and that kind of relationship. It was very important to us, a sense of belonging and that being ours and the whole thing also about where we lived with ours, we weren't unstable and I think the problem a lot with migrant families now is that instability. Maybe they have a lot, a place to live and they're paying on it. We never had that fear that we might lose it because it was ours. It had been given to my dad, even though it was small. We had a real stability there.

RK: In the family, did you share labor so that you would help with one another's crops?

RF: Yes we did that. I don't know what the arrangements were between my father and his brother, but we did that and we did that with extended family, like aunts and uncles. The beauty of that was as my dad grew older he would sit and talk about that whole network of friends who were maybe distant cousins or whatever, was how they had grown up and how they had developed relationships and how they still knew themselves in each other and how they supported each other in their work but also how they lived. It was wild. My father would talk about how they were a bunch of wild people. It was really the frontier thing about people would pack guns and pistols and they would go off and tear into town and whoop it up and that kind of stuff. It was like fun.

RK: That was a very male part of the culture I guess.
RF: Very male part of the culture. I haven't gotten my mother to break down and tell us what her deal was but she tells us a lot of stuff about family and her mother. Really the lines between men and women were very, very rigid. The man had his role and responsibilities and the woman had hers. But in my mother's case is how her mother protected her daughters. She was on their side and she was going to do everything to keep those girls protected from whatever she thought was going to harm them.

RK: But you still had to, because you only had one brother, go out and assume...

RF: We did everything.

RK: Did other female cousins do the same kind of work that you did?

RF: It all depended, I think, on the mothers frankly. If the mothers felt that the girls should not go out to work, they just didn't do it and my girl cousins, some of them weren't but on the other hand, in some other larger families, the girls worked as hard as the boys did and ours was the same. My brother was the youngest and so by the time he was old enough to do anything we had lost the farm and moved into town so he never really participated in the work that we did in the fields but all of the girls did.

RK: Was your father resentful at all of the fact that he had a whole crew of girls as opposed to boys?

RF: I think that's why he kept going, finally when he got the last
one. No, my dad was always very evenhanded. In the latter years when you sit back and analyze relationships, I did notice that even between mom and dad they were both pretty evenhanded although we knew basically that they favored the boy because he was a boy. You know you can always sense that. There was never a feeling that we were made less and so we loved my brother as much as anybody. We never feel that "you got better deal because you were the baby." But it was pretty evenhanded.

RK: So, maybe you can tell me a little about the jobs, the kind of work that you did.

RF: Everything during that period was pretty labor intensive. Everything was done by hand. Little hands were used as well.

RK: Some places better, I guess.

RF: For some things they were and of course in they have a lot of strawberries, very labor intensive and so we did a lot of strawberries. I remember, I must have been five or six years old doing that work and that was planting, sorting out the plants and then throwing them down. We would have a routine of somebody would just throw them down, place them and somebody in back would plant them, use their finger and plant the plant. The little kids would do those things that they could do nimbly and then the older person who knew how to do the planting which is more experienced would do that. Of course in harvesting the little kids harvested because it was
small and we were little and we could do that and so we harvested strawberries. The first thing in my life that I've ever known that I did was strawberries because that was the big crop in . The after that my dad planted tomatoes and all the vegetable crops, watermelon, and we would do all of that. We would do the hoeing, the thinning, the weeding. He would also use us for pests control. They used to have the big tomato worms and he would send us out when he saw the bugs coming and he would get us to, it's totally organic really, and we would kill all the bugs.

RK: You were totally integrated into the life of the farmer.

RF: Yes. Then of course we ate off of that product.

RK: Did you have animals?

RF: Yes. Mom tended to all of the animals which were the chickens and the hogs. We just had some, we didn't have alot of them.

Most of it was for consumption. We had a cow.

RK: So you were reasonably self-sufficient for food.

RF: As a matter of fact, we were. We managed except when the drought came it wiped even that part of it out. At that time my oldest sister had just graduated from high school in Poteat which is a farming community of about two thousand population. That was the school we went to for high school.

I must have been in sixth grade or seventh grade. When my oldest sister graduated from high school she moved to San Antonio and got a job at a bank and that's when the family
got real separated because it was tough and then my mom went with her. Mom started working in a laundromat so she could bring some income in. Dad and the rest of us stayed on the farm and we continued to try to do something down there. My father then started hiring out to the larger farmers there. They had pecan trees and things that hadn't been hurt by the drought because they were there for a long time, the trees were, and you can't damage them too much. So he started hiring out and did that for a few years until we really couldn't manage it anymore. The family was getting crazy. You know when you have that split - we could tell something was going nuts. We all moved into San Antonio when I was in the ninth grade.

RK: Had you gone up north before?

RF: Yes, before that.

RK: How many years did you do that?

RF: We started migrating, I can't even remember, I remember doing it when we were about eight or nine years old. We started migrating inside the state and then in 1955 we went into the midwest and came back.

RK: What was that experience like?

RF: That was a mindblower because we had never done that before. All of us went except my oldest sister. She is the one that graduated in 1955. She had already gotten her job at the bank and so we wanted her to stay there. It was all the rest
of us, five of us, four girls and my brother and my brother was six at that time. And so it was dad and mom and us, four girls and my brother, six workers. That's how you sell yourself to the growers by how many hands you have. We landed by phone, my father made the connection himself, a job with actually a really nice man, a Polish man from Wisconsin to do all his beets. You have to do the thinning and weeding and blocking. We finished that and said okay, where do we go, and then my dad hooked onto a crew leader who was actually also a nice person. Of course, we were pretty ignorant about the crew leader system, we had always worked independently. We had always gone to people who we knew. Dad would always make the deal with the grower. We didn't know any better and it was probably good that we did because we didn't know how to do it, so we hooked onto this crew leader and we did cherries in Wisconsin with him in two or three different orchards. Then we went with him and we did onions for a long time. We did a couple of other crops, I can't remember which ones they were but they weren't long. The ones that were the longest period of time were the cherries. It must have taken about four to six weeks and then the onions which was another big plot of time.

RK: How did you travel?

RF: When we went up to Mr. Jenky's we went in our car alone. So we just got a map and found the place. I remember dad stopping
and asking where it was. It was an experience. Then we hooked onto the crew leaders and then we followed the crew leader. We had our own car but we went in a caravan. But there were some other people who did that too. But the crew leader at that time had people in his big truck. He carried people in his truck. He was from south Texas from Pryor, I think, right near the border. He had come up, had these people with him, I think some people drove up too, and then we just caravanned around looking for work. He had a good contract so that we were, at least in terms of our jobs, pretty stable. The situation on housing and the job was horrible.

RK: It was different than anything that you had really experienced.

RF: Yes. Working with Mr. Jenky was fine because there was a one-on-one relationship. We would see him and his wife and they would bring us strawberries. They treated us nice, that we weren't just a work force because they saw us as all these little girls. They treated us well and were nice to us. I remember mom saying that the woman was real nice to her. But once we got into the contractor crew leader relationship it was totally different. It was like a grower dealing with a work force that he didn't want to personalize and he shouldn't have because if he had personalized it he would have seen that it was awful. We had, and they are outlawed now, but we had these big barracks, two-story barracks. They
outlawed two-story barracks because they can catch fire and there was no back door, one front door and there were cracks on the floor. I remember we could see down to the people on the bottom. There was one bathroom, one shower and they had no hot water and Wisconsin for a south Texan is cold.

RK: Particularly the water.

RF: The water - it was horrible! Then they had two outhouses. There must have been three hundred people there and we had two outhouses. It was disgusting. We would work in the fields and there was no field sanitation, no toilets. It was a horror!

RK: Did going north like that and seeing other people and other parts of the country have any kind of impact on you in terms of how you were thinking about your life at that time?

RF: You never realize it at the time, but I'm sure, because I remember all of that stuff clearly so something stuck about hey, something is screwy about this situation. But we were all Mexican, it was a totally Mexican crew. We didn't see one other color wherever we worked and this was in the fifties. So that means that Mexicans have been migrating into the Midwest for a long time. And these were not undocumented either. You remember the Program was still going on at that time. I guess they had their own relationships set up because the government was feeding them into the plantations but the people we were riding with, we
were all families and they were all Mexicans. That struck me as being, why is it just us that is running around doing this work? And, of course, then we got to see, even though there is a real strong attempt to keep the work force separated from the owners, there is always the possibility of the owners getting to know some of the workers. We got to know the owners pretty well. I kept thinking why in the world is this one person - you start to see the class, you start to see the economics of it all and I know we weren't getting paid very much. My dad did the arrangements but I know that when we got back that summer, this had been three months out there, my dad had a thousand dollars. When you think about how we lived, we didn't spend a helluva lot of money. We worked solid and we came back with a thousand dollars. Dad thought it was great money - he said "Oh my God, we can pay something off." But it was alot of work by alot of people, alot of risks that we took to come back with such a paltry amount of money.

RK:Before you moved into San Antonio, what did you see your life being like or did you think about it much, do you remember?

RF:I probably didn't think too much about it. When we were going to the country school, we went to a country school and for the first through the fourth grade, I did, my sisters went longer, in a totally country school. It was out in the middle of the country. And then in 1954, which was Brown vs.
the Board of Education, something happened in Texas and I don't know what, but they closed down that little school because it was a Mexican school. I'm not sure that they were directed to do anything but it seems kind of funny that they did it and then they - wait a minute, before that they wanted to make it a Mexican school because we had some mixture there, a couple of the farm boys were Anglos so they were going to school there and then something happened and they really did not want the Anglos there so they sent them to the larger school which apparently was supposed to have better teachers and they kept all of the Mexicans there and so it was really a Mexican school that we went to. There wasn't anybody else there. We knew that all the Anglo kids stayed on the bus and went into Poteat. For some reason, all the Mexican kids got off the bus. I wasn't real clear about what was going on there and no one is alive to explain it to me anymore. Actually, there is one teacher, I should find out from her. But people have different perceptions, you know that?

RK: Yes, I know.

RF: As I go about and I tell my sister, don't remember this, and she would say Rebecca that's not what happened. It's a totally different perception. The amazing thing is, that's what you grew up with and that's how you see things in the future, or anyway, I saw that. I saw that when I spoke
Spanish, I was slapped on the hand. I was slapped on the hand, my sisters weren't, apparently because they were never heard or whatever, because they spoke Spanish also.

RK: You parents would slap your hands?

RF: No, the teachers would slap you on the hand. You weren't supposed to do that. So that sort of stays with you because those little slaps - I was never brutalized - remind you of stuff and so that stays in your head. So anyway, all the Anglo kids stayed on the bus and they would get into school, into Poteat and then finally one year they closed the school down, they couldn't handle it and so all the Mexicans started going to the other school. In Poteat, it was a larger school, it had all the grades. You started seeing the policies of keeping the Mexicans out of some things and obviously one was that you couldn't be the majorette and you couldn't be the cheerleader and you couldn't be the queen. They had the strawberry festival there and you couldn't be the queen.

RK: Were there rules against that?

RF: There were rules that were practiced. I don't know if there were rules written down, but there were rules that were practiced. I remember my cousin that was a fighter from my mother's side - fighter from the word go - she was bound and determined that she was going to be queen and she raised a big stink. Of course, she was never queen, but she raised a
big stink. That was really when I started seeing, hey, there is something going on here. You sort of keep it in your head and sort of continue and keep it as an experience. But it was real clear that some things were happening then that I was understanding and it probably helped me some. I know that in the seventh and eighth grades you are very confrontational and I know that I was confrontational. I was in Poteat at that time. I was very confrontational and accusatory of my teachers of being discriminatory against the Mexicans. I remember saying that and getting sent to the principal's office. But I was coming from no context. I was the only one saying these things. I remember the other students agreeing. You know how you pal around and you sort of agree with things, except I was the only one that was forceful enough to say it and sent to the principal's office and that sort of stays in your experience about how you are going to deal in the future.

RK: What would they tell you?

RF: Well they would say they weren't. They would say "well, we're not," and I would say "well, you are," and we didn't develop it. When you are in seventh grade and you are out there in the fifties, you know there's something wrong here but you haven't developed your thoughts well enough that you can express it in a way that you can convince. And, you're in seventh grade, for God's sake. You are out there by
RK: It's amazing that you can do it at all.

RF: Frankly, I think I was the only one except for another young man, , who also started saying the same things as I was saying. He would say, "there's something wrong here." But we never took it any further than that. My cousin did though. She made a big deal over it but we didn't get anywhere with it.

RK: What was the Anglo-Mexican percentage?

RF: I do not have any idea but I think it was alot of us, alot of Mexicans.

RK: So they just had these kind of unwritten rules. There weren't any black students probably.

RF: No, not at all.

RK: That would have made things more complicated.

RF: More complicated anyway. I have found that when you are not a large minority that the majority will eat you up. You know what I mean? They will co-opt you real quick. That is what, I believe, has happened in the valley with the black minority where there's .02 percent. We have seen how the Anglos have taken the blacks in and made them part of them. At picket lines the blacks can be walking in with the whites together as friends and they'll be ugly as the whites are. I've seen how they are because they are not a threat. They keep them, co-opt them.
RK: When you moved, what was moving into San Antonio like?
RF: Well that was horrible. I was in ninth grade and all of my friends, my stability, it was horrible, very, very difficult because I went to a Mexican school. San Antonio was again defacto segregated so we all had our communities and we went to our community school. My school was all Mexican.

RK: That's when you were in San Antonio?
RF: Yes. That was in 1955. Of course, there were alot of gangs in San Antonio then. After that time, they were pretty much done away with and then of course, they've started up again recently, but at that time there were alot of gangs and alot of gang fights and clicks and I didn't understand it. I was from the country. Can you imagine country coming into this. San Antonio was real big and then I was smart I had a high IQ and nobody likes a new, smart kid on the block - nobody. It was real hard. And boys - everybody had a boyfriend and you couldn't mess with that one. It was awful and a real culture shock for me.

RK: What did you do to survive in that?
RF: You seek out people who you can hang out with and you sort of hunker down. That's what I did all of ninth grade. I just wanted to get out of there and get to high school because I thought maybe at high school people were grown up a little bit and of course they weren't. It wasn't any different. So when I graduated from junior high and we had a graduation
ceremony, we went into high school. Now that again was the Mexican school. It was a vocational and technical school which is where they sent all the kids to learn a vocation and a trade.

RK: So there wasn't even an pretense, that's just where you go?

RF: You know how they do. In ninth grade I was tracked and my ninth grade counselor said - and you know, sometimes you think they did it because they wanted to keep us where we were - but on the other hand, they might have been saying you need a trade when you get out of school. So they tracked all the girls to be secretaries and all the boys had their woodworking and carpentry and mechanics vocation. So all those kids got tracked into vocations. There were alot of vocational schools in San Antonio at that time. We all learned a trade. From ninth through twelfth, I learned to be a secretary.

RK: That's what they trained you to do?

RF: Yes. Everything I learned was business english, business math and everything was around business. It was a very good school but we paid a big price for that.

RK: In what sense?

RF: When I got out of school, it was about three or four hundred kids at the big school that graduated every year. That's alot of kids that were graduating from a totally Mexican community at that one school and there were a number of
schools. After I got out of high school, I started going to college at night. I kept thinking, there is something screwy in my life. It was like you were always seeking something. Finally the counselors from the college, it was a community school, called me and they said "if you want to continue coming to college, you have got to take your GED." I told them I graduated from high school, I was third in my class, I had 97.0 grade point average. They said they did not recognize the diplomas that came out of that school. Can you believe that? They had never recognized them. So, every student who had walked out of that school with a diploma had to take their GED. Now you tell me, how many would do it? How many would take that? If I remember correctly, it was either three or five days of tests in each subject matter and so you had to pay money to take the tests and then you would get your GED. How many people would do that?

RK: Not very many.

RF: Not very many would do that. And so that's the price that we paid. It was a huge price. When I found that out, that bothered me so much because I knew what had happened to all of those kids. It was alot of smart kids in there and how this other obstacle had been placed in front of them that they would have to hurdle over - one more fight. And of course alot of them were able to but when you think of all the others who didn't, who said "I hate taking tests" "I'm
not going to take another test".

RK: They didn't even know they weren't getting a good education.

RF: I never knew. I never knew that going to Tech would not be a good diploma. I never knew that. Isn't that amazing? So anyway, that's the price that we paid. That's a lot of money, a lot of money.

RK: It's almost like having a dual school system.

RF: That's exactly what it was. And you know, they would say "well only the smart kids go to Jefferson." They would always tell you that you really couldn't do it, that Jefferson, which was where all the Anglos went and the smart Mexicans, you had to be real smart so it discouraged.

RK: Was there a class dimension within the Mexican community that played a role in this, say the kids in the Mexican families that had been in the city for a long time and they were business and professionals, did they go to that school?

RF: I really don't know. Probably, but I don't remember. A lot of them went to Catholic schools. They had a lot of good Catholic schools. We had two maybe three good ones. A lot of the prominent Mexicans sent their kids to Catholic school. But we never crossed paths with the Jefferson crowd.

RK: So were you aware of class differences within the Mexican community?

RF: Yes some but not very much. We really hung out with our own kind. I lived in a very poor community and being from the
country, you don't explore that much because you really are worried. You say, God, I've got to know where I'm at. But we did get to see the other kids from that part of town like Lanier and . We were all Mexican. San Antonio is Mexican. There are a few Anglos, a few blacks - the black population must be ten percent so there are really not that many. The majority of them are us and then some, about thirty percent, are Anglo. If I remember correctly, at that time the school board was all Anglo. It was really under control. It is too bad that they didn't see, it seems to me that people who were on the board then look back on their experience, it would be so bad to see what a great wrong they did and if they did that consciously, how devilish, how diabolical for them to have done so many bad things to so many people. I struggled with being a secretary for a long time. I hated it. But I didn't know how to get out of it. But it saved my life. I started working right away and I had a skill and I started working and got income into my family which we needed at that time. All of us did that. We got out of high school, we all started working, we started buying a house in town.

RK: Did your sisters continue live and work there?

RF: Yes. So, I actually, I push that on my kids all the time. I tell them they need to learn how type and have some skill that you can sell so that you can always fall back on it.
But, I was very unhappy with it and finally I'll never know what caused it but I just quit. I quit my job.

RK: Where were you working?

RF: I was working for Civil Service in San Antonio. That's pretty much all you have. I was working at that time at Randolph Airforce Base. I was a secretary there. I think I was a GS-5. Actually, it was probably as high as you could get as a secretary. I quit and took out all of my pension, $2500. I started going to school. I quit cold turkey and started going to school.

RK: That's amazing.

RF: Yes it was. It was a big deal. I don't know how I ever did it. I left my house. My mom and dad were totally opposed to it. They said "you've got a job, you've got a good job and you are going to lose all this stuff." They are always concerned about your future. I said "no, I hate it, so I'm leaving." So I got my money and then I left the house because I wanted to break out of the house too. So I went to Texas A&I which is in Kingsville. It was a dorm so I could just go over there and study. I hated it and it was so racist. You could just feel the tension. It's down in south Texas. I stayed there one semester. We four Chicanas were the first Chicanas to open up this dorm to Mexicans. We were the first ones so they selected all these light colored Chicanas. Two of them had green eyes and another one was
real blonde and I'm kinda light. They stuck us in the rooms that were next to the back exit. Isn't that something? We finally had to come in and out of the back door which was really what the setup was. So, anyway, I left after a semester and started going to St. Mary's University.

RK: What was that like because that was an important place for a lot of students of activism in the sixties?

RF: Yes it was except I never knew anything about that. I didn't know or care at all because I was working. What we had was we went to school in the morning and we worked in the afternoon. You were tied to making money to support yourself. You sort of stayed out of the whole thing. Nothing that I can remember happened during campus. The campus was apparently was still pretty controlled by the priests there and so they wouldn't allow sit-ins or demonstrations or whatever on campus. So most of the development was I think among those young men where they forced it among themselves and they would do things in the community. All my years there which was from 1967 to 1970 I do not remember there being any kind of activity on campus. But I remember those young men taking it on with Henry B and doing some things politically but not there on the campus. I think they took it out of the campus.

RK: They were going to school there and organizing in the community?
RF: Yes. I think they were doing a lot of stuff in the community. Since I was working, I didn't get into that and I regret it. I really regret not doing that. I knew a lot of the political science people and I was not in political science. I did not go to those classes in political science except for one class, a required class. That's where all of those guys were. I was in sociology which is a whole different mindset. I was taking sociology and Spanish. If you're not in the loop - I'm sorry I was not in that. I'll tell you though where I became politicized was when I got into graduate school. That's really where it all happened for me.

RK: That must have been an even bigger move to head to Michigan.

RF: It was great!

RK: How did that come about?

RF: Well, I had gotten out of school at St. Mary's and I was ready to work. I was accepted by Social Security to become a claims representative. That means taking in claims for social security. So they stuck us in a three month training program, real intensive training, very good training program at Social Security. At that time, they were really trying to get a lot of minorities and I remember having lots of minorities in that training class. It was a very good training class but it was - have you ever seen the social security act and the volumes you have to deal with - it was a real mindsetter. I took three months of training and then
was a trainee in Pasadena, Texas for that summer and I thought - this is not for me.

RK: It was more like being a secretary but with more responsibility?

RF: Oh, it was awful. It was forms, everything had a form and everybody had to document it. You had to search it and people do not document. Do you know that? People do not keep documents. And of course, the Mexicans were given to us because we spoke the language and the Mexicans don't keep documents. They lose them and they don't know where they were last and no social security and it was horrible. We had the tough cases. So, anyway, I said "no this is not for me."

At that time, my brother-in-law's cousin had just started school at the University of Michigan and the blacks had closed the University of Michigan down. It was in 1970. My brother-in-law's cousin had been part of that movement and in the negotiations when they struck the agreement that there was going to be a recruiting of minorities including Mexicans and native Americans, I heard about him and I said I'm going to apply and I applied and they accepted me. And I said good-bye Pasadena, I'm outta here. So, I got in my car and I left. By that time mom and dad had gotten used to my making those decisions. But the key thing in this is how I was able to make decisions that were critical and keep them. I'm surprised at myself for having been able to do that. Anyway,
when I got into Michigan, that was the turning point I think in my life where I finally was able to form a community of people who thought and who worked out their feelings and their thoughts about where we were and where we wanted to go. It was a very tight-knit community. We were five men and me who were recruited to be in that.

RK: So what was Michigan like? So they gave you a scholarship?

RF: I got a full scholarship. I got everything paid and I got a stipend.

RK: How much?

RF: Three hundred dollars a month. Three hundred a month paid the bills. It paid my rent and it paid my food which I was always worried about and my gas expenses. That gave us so much freedom to do stuff. At least, if nothing else, to sit and talk to each other. I think talking to each other I don't think happens very often anymore.

RK: So, who were the other people or what kind of people were they?

RF: Well they are all Chicanos from Texas. There were six of us.

RK: So you had a core.

RF: Core group of Chicanos. Most of them were from UT and me from St. Mary's University. I was like a fluke. Unless it was a connection, I don't know what it was, how I got in. But, anyway, I got in. I couldn't believe I had gotten in. It was probably the best thing that ever happened to me. And I
always thank those blacks that got together and struck, not only the students that struck but the service workers that had that strike, for having given me that opportunity to learn so much. Not so much in the classroom, although of course, it is always there, but to learn so much by seeing people in action. I think that I have learned more by seeing people in action than by studying. I think it is good to know the theory and I don't put that down. I think you have got to learn planning and you have got to learn administration. I think that's the key to any kind of job that you have or any kind of thing that you want to do. If you don't plan it out, you don't administer it right, you're sunk. But the experience that I had in just seeing people do things was probably the most important thing.

RK: What were the kinds of discussions that you were having among yourselves, the six of you, and then, I assume discussions with lots of other people? Could you just talk a little bit because I think that is another key thing of finding ways to bring activists together that come from different backgrounds, to let them look at similar kinds of problems.

RF: The first thing that sort of hit me when I was in Michigan was that people were freeing themselves from things and I remember the feminist movement. I remember the women burning their bras. And that may be something that people laugh at but that is very important. It was a tradition, or whatever
bras are, I don't know what they are anymore. People were saying, to hell with it, we don't have to wear this. I had been in a Catholic college, for God's sake. We wore stockings to school and heels and dresses. All of a sudden I arrived and saw all these women with hairy legs, no bras and smoking pot. I said my God if we can do these things, there is a possibility of freeing ourselves up from these things that we think are important. The whole period of freedom which I think was happening where people were becoming free was real important where we said we can sluff off some things that don't matter and we can look at things that actually do matter. Of course, at that time, the gays were also coming out and they were organizing. We happened to have our office next to the gays. If you want to talk about gays and Mexicans, that is something else. But the Mexicans, and they were all men that were with us, were very, very open about the gay movement and they saw it as a movement of people who wanted to express themselves freely which is the same thing that we wanted. We saw that they had as much a right as we did. We saw that and we saw the women. I happened to room with a Jewish woman and of course in social work there are lots of Jews. What do you call them - the princess - with their hair. But they were wonderful because they had really been analyzing this stuff for a long time. They are at it at all times and they are talkers. They want to define things
and analyze things to the nth degree. I got involved with them in the feminist movement. And this was only beginning and I am not saying that I was into it with them deep but I did get into some really good conversations where they really began to open up my eyes about the relationship between the Chicanas and Chicanos. Until then, the Chicanos were saying you Chicanas do not get into the feminist movement because we have to resolve our problems first. I remember that so clearly.

RK: So they would tell you that?

RF: Yes, don't get into that Rebecca, you are going to divide us up. And then, the Jewish women said Rebecca, what are you doing with those men over there. Wonderful, wonderful women who were not being ugly or anything just letting me hear another side which was obviously correct. Even though I had to tow the line somewhat because I did have all these men, it was kind of a difficult thing, but I did manage to maintain some integrity with both my feminists friends and also my Chicano, macho friends who were very fine men. One of the first things that we did there was join the great boycott, us Chicanas. What you did there is you sort of said this is what we are in terms of action. We started doing alot of things there in Ann Arbor on the great boycott so people began to see us as activists rather than anything else. We became known as an activist crowd. Therefore, we were
involved in a lot of the activities that were going on in terms of aggressive activities where we would sit down and talk to the policy makers the school social worker. We were part of a lot of the committee structure in the university, primarily in the area of recruiting and scholarships. That was where we wanted to focus. Our discussion among ourselves was that and I remember it then and I remember it now was that we committed ourselves that once we were graduates that we would come back and work in our community. That was like a sacred vow and I remember doing it in that we would all be sitting around the apartments, we all would hang out together, and we would make a real solemn and by and large everyone of us did. I've been in south Texas forever working with farm workers. Another friend is in San Antonio working with   . There is a lot of political work in San Antonio. Another friend is in New Mexico working with mental health and mental retardation. A lot of people have come back and done a lot of work with our community.

RK: I was in Chapel Hill about that same time. I was an undergraduate and graduated in 1971. One of the things that was very important to me was all the people that would come through and the Michigan was even more on the main line so all these activists would come through from all over the country and all over the world. We would go and listen to them. For some reason we were always bringing in these kind
of old left people to come and talk to us. Was that important there too, did you learn from that?

RF: I remember came. Of course, we booed him almost because he had changed. He was saying organize the middle class. And we were saying, what do we want to organize the middle class for. They are already organized. We almost strangled him. That was right before he died. Then we had the Black Panther that was killed a few years ago, Huey Newton. We were totally disappointed in what he said because he didn't say anything. The other thing we were there for was all the anti-Vietnam war protests. That was where the cradle of the anti-war movement was from. I remember vividly these protesters digging craters in the lawn so that people would understand how the Vietnamese were suffering because they had all these craters. We were living out there and we would have demonstrations. It was just so active! We would demonstrate in Detroit. I remember doing marches in Detroit. On campus, for the gays, against the war - it was just alot of activity and people would come, I can't remember all the names of people who did come, who were known and we would go and listen. It was like a forum of exchanging ideas. The SDS of course was strong there. The White Panthers were real strong there. Besides listening, there was alot of information on the newspaper and so there was alot of analysis going on about where the SDS was and did we want to
proceed after that, that kind of thinking, or the White Panthers and all that kind of stuff. There was alot of also debate among us. Like I said, we were all trying to define ourselves - how is it we were going to move - even if we didn't feel that we were a part of the whole Chicano movement, but at least among ourselves and I thought that was real broadening for all of us.

RK: The war really kind of opened up our perspective on the world.

Did you start seeing the concerns of Mexican Americans as part of some kind of larger international set of issues?

RF: No, I really didn't. We were pretty nationalistic, frankly. We really weren't looking at it as an international kind of connection at all. We were nationalists and actually we were groping to find out how we could fit into what was going on and the one thing that was real prominent at that time was the farm workers movement. It was the farm workers and it was Corky over in Colorado and in New Mexico.

It was three leaders that people followed rather than three movements. Three movements but spearheaded by charismatic leaders. We listened to those three individuals real fervently. Corky never came to the university. Caesar did come to that area, Detroit, because he was always moving. But I don't remember seeing Corky nor although we followed what they were doing real carefully. We were supportive of the whole land issue. was pushing the
land was ours and treaty and so we were very schooled in that whole idea. Corky of course was more pride than anything else. The funny thing is that we set aside all the old ones, and that was and the American Forum. They are the old organizations – was pushing education and the Forum was pushing pride in being Americans. Of course, they come from the GI movement. We sort of set them aside and we were really following these other three charismatic leaders. And we did. All of us went and worked on the boycott there in that area, in that community. From the people who went to Michigan, me, David Martinez who is of the union and who is first vice-president of the union, we all went to Michigan and we all have been in the union movement since that time. That is a long time and we all came out of Michigan. That is amazing.

RK: You met your husband there and then you moved back here. What about that decision?

RF: It was kinda of part of the decision that we had made initially that we all were going to go back to our roots. It wasn't a difficult decision. Jim fortunately, my husband, had also been working with farm workers for many years in the summers and he had worked through the Catholic church in Michigan and done alot of social service. As he was in law school he branched out and started doing legal outreach. He wasn't an attorney but he was educating people on their legal rights.
In the summertime of 1971 and 1972, during the summer breaks for me in school, I also went and worked as a legal outreach in social services in Michigan over by the lake.

RK: The migrants were still coming up, weren't they?

RF: Yes, in huge numbers. But Jim had been doing that for years before and so he knew a lot of those and a lot of those people are from south Texas. The connections were already made and when we got married, we got married in 1972, he only needed one more year in school and so we lived in Detroit for a year and then we went to San Juan. He got a job with the ACLU down there right away. I didn't get a job with the union right away. I worked with a child care center a couple of years and I taught at the university a couple of semesters and did some other things. In 1975 Caesar asked me to be the director of the union effort. I have been doing that since then.

RK: Maybe you could just tell me a little historical background of the union in Texas up to that point - some sense of the world and the set of issues you were coming into at that point.

RF: In 1966 farm workers in Rio Grande City, which is Starr County which is right on the border, part of what we call the lower Rio Grande Valley which is where most of the farm workers reside in Texas, these are the migrants, and seasonals for the state for the country, the melon pickers in Starr County had a strike over wages. I think they were getting paid
forty-five cents an hour. It was led by Eugene Nelson who was not UFW - he was independent union, I don't remember the name of the union, and he still around I think he is in California. He was like a socialist. He came from the socialist era where you did alot of stuff around workers issues. He came really on his own. He didn't have a staff.

He came and he saw and people were ready to go. When you look at history, you can see how things just bubble up. Everything bubbles up at one point, everybody starts getting crazy. This was the sixties, after the strikes in California with the grape pickers, that was in 1965 - 1966. It was like winds that run across the country. In 1966 there was a huge strike that was very popular with support all around the state among Mexicans, among workers. But, there was also a very strong effort by the state of Texas to kill it. That was when John Conley was governor. Everyone loved John Conley. He had just been shot also with the president so he was like he could do no wrong. But he was a jerk, a first-class jerk in terms of workers. He sent in the Texas Rangers which are the elite at the governors disposal. At this time it is not, they are just like another group of department of public safety guys that wear hats and look fancy. But at that time, I believe they were at the disposal of the governor. And so he sent them down there and his effort was, of course, to kill the strike. They did their darndest to do
that. They harassed, they beat up. We have pictures of them sitting on the train wagons making sure that the product got to the market with their guns. Oh give me a break! Talk about neutrality of the state. There was alot of violence on this side of the state and so what happened was that because there was so much violence and because there were alot of priests involved, they decided that they wanted to tone it down and they were going to do a march. I think the season was over. It's a one month long season. They started marching in Rio Grande and they wound their way around Texas.

They went to alot of little towns and got alot of support. People still remember that as being one of the most important things in their history. When they got to New — which is just south of here about forty miles, John Connely and his lieutenant governor, Ben Barnes and the secretary of state, Wagner Carr, arrived and parked where the farm workers were resting and told them not to come. They had only traveled five hundred miles and then Connely tells them, don't come, I'm not going to be at the Capitol when you get there so don't come, go back to where you came from. I don't want you there. By that time, as things happened, the issues had strayed away from strikes and that kind of stuff and people had landed on the idea that Texas should have a minimum wage of a dollar an hour. That was their big deal, to come to the Capitol and say we want a minimum wage. Anyway, Connely said
he wasn't going to be there and so the farm workers say well we don't care if you are there or not. That also was real important in terms of galvanizing and people understanding politically who were our friend and who weren't our friends.

From that day on, Mexicans have hated John Connely. When he got broken, when he got one vote to the national convention as a Republican, we laughed because he did us dirty. He didn't need to do that. And because we really respected him and thought well when you get shot -

RK: He had the image of having close ties to Kennedy

RF: He really did, but it showed up. I remember my dad who actually had some real personal understanding of where he was. He understood where he was as a Mexican as a man in the total spectrum of politics in the state. I remember him watching that on television and cussing John Connely out. That was the first time I had ever seen him make a political statement and saying how can he do that to farm workers. You know how you are with your father and mother, you never think that they are smart, until later and then you know that they are brilliant and that they have been brilliant all their lives. I thought my God listen to my father cussing John Connely out. John Connely was supposed to be the governor and he was shot and everything and all of a sudden my father was taking a real hard position against him. That's stuck in my brain forever. The farm workers proceeded into Austin and
that of course has been one of the biggest marches into Austin in the history of Austin. They had thousands of people join the farm workers to march in to the Capitol. So that was in 1966. After that it pretty much died. There was an effort but it's real hard to keep it going. In 1969 the union, the United Farm Workers, and Caesar was here now, of course, Caesar was also very young at that time. He was just starting the union in California and also trying to figure out where he was and trying to determine whether he could take on more than California. They did send someone from California in 1969 to open up an office first in Rio Grande City, very temporary office, and then they moved it to McGowen and then they moved it to where it is in San Juan. In 1973 when we first arrived in San Juan, they had just built the office and opened it up. Before that they were in temporary, rented buildings. From that movement down there in south Texas, we spawned off the migrant health clinic. Dr. started working with us to provide health care for the farm workers. You know how one person has an idea and then kicks of and it gets big, from that we got the migrant health program. David Hall and the ACLU, the south Texas project, started with that effort. From 1967 or 19969 on the ACLU had a project in south Texas and dealt with farm worker issues. That's where my husband started working initially. The credit union started down there from the farm workers.
There are a lot of things that have branched off, a lot of development that came out of that movement and because part of the community.

RK: So when you came on board, there was already an existing organization?

RF: Yes.

RK: What did you feel about the challenge of trying to organize? Certainly you knew by then the kind of odds you were up against.

RF: It is hard. Organizing is hard at its best when you have a crowd or a population that's informed, willing to take risks, all of that. But it is very difficult when the odds are against them. That's pretty much what happened down there. On the other hand, those odds that are so heavy against people help you in organizing. You have a true padre of people who understand that the risks that they take are for, in the long run, the betterment of themselves and for their family. Some people aren't willing to make those long-term decisions. What I've seen though is that people commit for awhile and then they back off. I think that maybe that's natural. I don't know. Then they'll commit for another three years or four years and back off a little bit. In 1975 when I became director of the union, there was a move among individuals in the Chicano community to establish independent unions, independent from Caesar's, United Farm Workers,
because they claimed that Caesar had an iron hand and he wouldn't allow them to do things and everything had to go through a national board which was true. During the summer of 1975 there were a lot of strikes going on in south Texas. Again melons. We had a big shooting in the valley where this grower shot at a crew of workers and hurt them. Then we had the mayor of McGowan pulling out guns at people and we had him on national television. There was a lot of strikes. There were like thousands of workers on strike, a general strike with no control. The national television was there and they happen to televise some strikers throwing melons at some workers. It looked ugly. So Caesar got on the phone to who was the treasurer of the union and was in charge of Texas and Caesar said what is going on, why don't you have this thing under control? It was a big discussion over that.

Tony decided on his own, he didn't take anybody's counsel on that, to form an independent union. He came to Austin and he incorporated under what we know as the company union law which allows you to incorporate as a union but doesn't allow you to have members. It was a stupid thing for him to do. How can you have a union without members? But the other thing is, how he ever thought he could be independent. An independent farm worker's union, that does not work because even under United Farm Workers where we had the prestige of long-term successes, failures too but we've stuck it out for
all these years, we have Caesar who is brilliant, we have alot of smart board members who are commited and we are having a hard time. How can a union withstand the ups and downs of what goes on in the field? We were having small meetings at that time and Tony came and he said I want to form an independent union and these are the reasons. My husband and I and some others said no, we think it is wrong for you to do that. We had a long discussion about that question. But he had already done it. He went off on his on. We stayed with the UFW and that's one of the reasons I was named the director. Tony had left. That's one of the reasons, probably the only one. I was the only one there.

RK:During these first years, what did you try to do? Was the experience that you brought from your activism in Michigan and all the discussions there - what did you set out trying to do?

RF:One of the first things that we tried to do is try to establish ourselves. People go on reputation and everybody knew Tony and everybody thought they should follow Tony. We had to do alot of work in terms of organizing the community in the valley to understand what a labor union was and how we should form committee structures and how we should vote and how we should decide what the issues were. That's really what we started doing and that is a seven day a week job. I remember when, that was when I was having all of my babies, I would
take them to all of the house meetings that I used to do. I used to do a house meeting every night of the week. The way we started, this is the training that Fred Ross does - he used to be with Saul Lindsky. Fred and Saul split up when Saul went off in organizing his middle class and also organizing around organizations. Saul said let's quit this individual organizing, let's organize organizations and that way we can get at the quirks of the problems more quickly. Fred said you cannot organizations, you have to organize individuals. It was a real split in how you do things. Fred has been the mentor of the union forever. He met up with Caesar and in the early fifties, I believe.

RK: Do you know Dick Boone?

RF: Yes.

RK: He worked with Saul Lensky in Chicago when he was in school there and was out organizing gang members. He worked for the police department. What he did was go out and try to organize gang members. The earlier Lenskey model is kind of where alot of his ideas that he then used in poverty cases came from.

RF: In terms of influence, powerful influence, Lensky is - I don't know what happened to him right before he died - his mind was gone or something. But anyway, Fred Ross came down to south Texas and at that time we had gotten alot of farm workers to participate with us in organizing. They were paid by some
local funds there. These people were right out of the fields - right out of the fields. So Fred Ross comes and he stays with us for a month and he trains us on house meeting campaigns. Intensive training. He goes back and does research on the history of farm worker organizing in Texas. He wants us to understand everything about organizing and about farm workers. He does a lot of research, spends days in the library there locally. Then he comes back and starts taking us by the hand and saying this is how we are going to do this campaign. To this day, we follow that model. He said start with one person and I remember the person we started with. Go to that person and have that person invite his family and also people who he confides in in his neighborhood. We started off with one house in San Juan with four people. Now we have fifty-two committees that are still working. From those four people you ask for the second meeting and you draw different people. But you get one person to have it in his house. It is all people who have confidence with each other because you don't want people saying don't do that. The we have the third house meeting. At the third house meeting we would get everybody together that went to the meetings and we would establish a committee of people that would select their leadership and we had the director and people who would deal with social problems in the community - what's going on, who needs help, that kind of
stuff - and we would have the political person who would make sure everybody was registered to vote. We had a real structure that would work. And then, we went to the next and that's how we went. We would do a meeting a week. In four weeks we would have a committee set up in the . Every night we had a meeting. We had seven committees going, each of us. We had I don't know how many staff at the time, probably six. It was exhausting work. All my kids were little and I would haul them around. It also was really important in terms of role models. I saw it so significantly at that time. I was a woman director of the union which is unusual. Especially in our union.

RK: Particularly in agriculture, that's very unusual.

RF: And among Mexicans? Even worse. As I was trooping, by myself, I did not have my husband driving the car, by myself with a small child, I breast fed all my kids, what happened was a lot of women and men saw that was not an obstacle. I'm not saying that those women saw it but that the men might have seen it as an excuse to keep him home and not to have them active. I don't think the men say don't work because you have a baby, stay home. I think some needs are bigger than others and I know I've seen women working with babies along side them forever in the field. So, that's not always a no-no. But in terms of political work and the kind of work that we were doing, you could see the men saying, well, maybe you
shouldn't do that kind of stuff because you might get in trouble. But the women who are strong and who are not timid as alot of times people portray Mexican women, said no she's working at night, got that baby, and I am going to do it too.

We have more women leaders in the union down in the valley than you would believe. Fifty percent if not more of the leadership in the valley are women. These women have taken on the growers, because it is easier for women to take on growers and crew leaders. Those are all men, otherwise, I understand it, I'm not saying that men are not courageous, they are, but the men say look, if we get in that position where we are debating with the growers or crew leaders, a fight can come out of that and we obviously do not want to fight. If you are ever in a field, there are alot of sharp things out there - knives, clippers, things like that that can really hurt - by and large the women were always in the front. We were always the ones that took the crew leaders on. We debated with them. We got into pretty good shouting matches with them. We would take on the growers. The women were fantastic! I think that has been unusual in that they have developed so much but probably not unusual in that alot of the fights are led by women. It has been a real joy for me to see that happen.

RK:Particularly in the industry where labor history indicates that there are alot of women workers. I'm always amazed that even
when they don't get the national publicity or recognition that you really look behind the scenes of the organization, day to day activities, there's a tremendous amount of strength and dedication.

RF: Dedication - I think the dedication. Then they take this information or knowledge and their commitment and they use that in the other organizations that they belong in. I have watched . I organized. I went to her house and from that house meeting that we had, I remember seeing her, she was breast feeding her child, we were both in the same situation, her babies, had fifteen children. You could tell that she wanted more out of life. She just knew she wasn't going to be stuck there with fifteen kids. She has these bright, shiny eyes that just glitter. She talks with her eyes. And I remember talking to her at her kitchen table and I had my little girl with me. Paulo, her husband, was looking down. He did not want to make eye contact with me. But was looking me straight in the eye. Being a devout Catholic that she obviously is, has taken this whole idea of how women can lead and how women are leaders and how she has an important say in what goes on with her community and her kid's lives. She has taken the same energy to the Catholic church where she participates. She has taken it to the school where her kids go to school and she has taken it to the migrant health clinic where she goes and has become a
leader in each of those areas. It's not only working with people in the fields that we have had an impact, I believe. We have taken those farm workers and they are all farm workers. None of them have had education in schools. They hardly know how to speak any English. We have given them some skills in terms of analysis and taking risks. I think that's a big problem. So they can take it on to the other organizations that have an impact on them.

RK: In some cases, the greatest success of organizations like yours is developing and training that leadership that can move when the time is right. People don't understand that sometimes if you are not out having big demonstrations, you don't have a strike, you haven't won these huge wages, that you're not active. A lot of the important things in this kind of work is stuff that you just have to do everyday but you don't really see for years maybe the results.

RF: The problem, I think, with farm working and of course like you say, there are a lot of good things that happen in these kinds of situations, but when you look back and you analyze the work, farm work and where is farm work today, you'll know that a lot of people come through and a lot of people get out of it. They are creamed right out of there by the different programs that exist in this country right now. Like your JPTA training programs or whatever, there are a lot of programs that are out there, social service programs, that
ease people out of that system. But nevertheless, that system still exists, that system of slavery still exists. For those people who are able to get out, that's fine. For those people who can't get out of the system for whatever reason, the system of farm work in this country is really a system of bondage almost. And so it is good that people are able to move out of there but this country has not addressed or has in fact addressed farm work and they have maintained it in the same situation that it has been in for the past two hundred years where wages are rotten, where there are no protections and where people suffer a lot to make an honest and decent living on a commodity that is so necessary for everyone to live. I was looking at the GAO report that just came out earlier this year. It says the situation for farm workers is horrible. So the government knows it, everybody knows it. Yet, for some reason the heart of the problem has never been addressed and that is the way farm work is done in this country is not addressed. Everything else is addressed.

We need to train them and get them out. We need to provide better migrant help and so they do that. But they don't get to the heart of the problem. And why, well we know why, because the agricultural community in this country is still so powerful not in combination with the chemical industry and the others that live off of it that they want to maintain a labor force that is at their beck and call. So, yes things
have been goood, but on the other hand things have not changed. The larger issues have not changed.

RK: It is interesting

RF: She hates the Rangers because they busted up her office time and time again. But she said we didn't have a car so we would get on the bus and would go up and down the valley and she has these stories. But I've got to get her.

RK: That's a great history.

RF: They organized lots of people down there, thousands.

RK: There's a big pecan worker's local.

RF: The other one is she lives in San Antonio. She's more publicized than did. Emma didn't stick it out like she did. Emma was thrown in the slammer and accused for being a Communist and things like that so she dropped out after a while.

RK: Before you moved to Austin, what were the biggest obstacles you faced trying to be down there organizing using this union model and the kind of community organizing strategy?

RF: The biggest ones of course were the ones that the growers instilled in people in the membership by saying if you do anything about your union membership and that means if you try to do anything aggressive here on the workplace, then you're fired. And, in fact, they did. They fired some people just to make example cases of them. They would fire
them if whatever, if they were caught at the union hall, or whatever reason. And of course, we would get it back. Well they fired me because they know I'm a member. And the crew leaders know everybody so they would pick and choose since there's so big a work force, they would pick and choose whoever they wanted. If you were union, you would be left begging. People would know and they would say, gosh, what am I getting out of the union? Am I getting anything? Am I getting set aside because I am a union member? So that is always a problem. We used to have our conventions, and we still do, we have had a convention since 1979 in the valley - big, big conventions for farm workers. A thousand farm workers get together and they are all delegates from their committees. We decided early on that they would have to be on Sunday so that workers would have the day off for sure. And what happened was that some workers were offered jobs on Sundays too. So there's always an attempt to break the organization or break the spirit of the organization. And some people are willing to say I'm taking off, I don't care others are told if you don't come, you are out of a job period, so they don't take that risk. There's always an attempt, forever there will be an attempt, to undercut our unionizing efforts. That's at the heart of organization and they know it. I always tell farm workers, you know, you don't know what power you have. These guys are scared to
death of you, the growers are scared to death of you. If you get together, don't you know that? It's just so hard to make them realize that they have so much power when they are organized. But, there have always been efforts. They have fired people, harassed people, shot at our building time and again. They have done every possible thing that you can absolutely think of, they have done it.

RK: Then also, once they started mechanizing things, there are always not enough jobs to go around.

RF: Yes it is a large work force. Of course that's the other thing that they always throw at them. If you try to increase your wages or you try to get worker's comp or unemployment comp, you know what, I'm going to mechanize. And then where are you going to be? So they always throw that at the people. Some people understand. They say, look we wouldn't ever organize and you mechanized the cotton. So what's the big difference? Don't throw that in our faces. You are going to mechanize when it is economically feasible for you and not until then. But if we're hurt, we want you take care of our injury.

RK: When did you decide to move to Austin? Basically that means some kind of a change in strategy too of how you work as an activist and an advocate.

RF: Well, in 1983 we had being trying to pass legislation which we considered to be real important. Texas is a right to work
state, you know that, and is also a very oppressive state in terms of workers. It is not a good boycottable state in terms of we don't have a big company to boycott, there's not a big name you can boycott. It is very hard to get union contracts and so we said why don't we shift our vision and try to get benefits through legislature. In a union contract, you always have worker's comp, unemployment comp, things like that. So we said, let's try that since we are not going to get a union contract, let's try this other thing. We came to Austin in 1983 and worked real diligently and put more effort into lobbying. I was a lobbyist. For the rest of that decade, we passed a worker's comp law that protected farm workers and an unemployment compensation law and then we passed a right to know law which was for the issue of pesticides. We got field sanitation for farm workers and drinking water. We banned the use of the short handled hoe and I think maybe that was it. They meet every two years, so it was a big effort. We were obviously never able to do one in one situation.

RK: How were you able to accomplish all that because this is a real anti-union state?

RF: Oh, it was hard and it wasn't by the graces of the legislature that we accomplished it. I happen to be married to an attorney. He was a civil liberties attorney and Texas has an equal rights amendment. So, you have to sort of look at
that in that context. Jim firmly believed that civil liberties includes workplace liberties, that you have a right to work. And then, we had the equal rights amendment and the federal judges were no longer real friendly. So he started using the equal rights amendment in Texas that says protect you against discrimination because of your sex, national origin and whatever. So he showed and Texas law, it was so discriminatory that they would always say and there will always be worker's compensation for everybody except farm workers and we are going to treat them differently. So were able to show through depositions and through committee meetings and hearings that the majority of the farm workers in Texas are Mexican. And so Jim took that to court and he said these people are being denied protection under the ERA because of their national origin. And we won the cases all the way to the Supreme Court. The Texas Supreme Court by that time was good. We had been able to do alot of political work, changes so that it was progressive. It was almost the first time and it is going back now. He would take the cases to the Supreme Court and then they would find in our favor. And so they would say yes, you are right, you have been discriminated against, and therefore we mandate the legislature to pass a law that won't discriminate. They were forced to. In the forcing of it, we still had to write the legislation, so it was alot of work between ourselves and the
growers and the legislators to come up with something that everybody would work with. We wanted it to work. We didn't want for us to be so right that the growers would fight it and we would never get anywhere. So we tried to do that and were successful. We did the same thing for every one of those issues. We had to go through the court system first, get support from the Supreme Court to fall back and then do legislative work. And even after we got the blessing from the Supreme Court saying we do not want discrimination anymore the legislature was so against farm workers that we would only win by a small majority. They wouldn't say well it's a done deal, we've got to vote for it. We would never have gotten a hundred and fifty votes. It was eighty one or eighty two votes and we had to work for every vote still. It was not easy.

RK: Did you have to do alot of coalition building to do that?

RF: Primarily labor in those issues. Worker's comp is a labor issue and unemployment comp is a labor issue. The right to know actually was kind of funny and I say this because I think it is a good reminder. Right to know was passed in 1985 for all the industrialized workers. It was passed here in the state of Texas and the Sierra Club and their labor legislator passed it and once again excluded farm workers by SIC code, the standard industrial code. Everybody is covered except these guys and it happened to be us. So we hit the
ceiling. We said how in the hell in 1985 are you still doing that to us? It was labor and environmentalists. Well they said, we wanted to pass it. Yeah, it is fine and dandy for you to say that but where does that leave us? How can you do that to the brothers and sisters who are working right now hard? We already knew how to go about it but it just gave us another two years where we had to go out and hit people over the head with it, fight it out. The last one has been the right to know thing. I know that the unions right now are working on a thing called right to act which is a part of right to know.

We are starting to talk about it right now. Where we have given up on agencies to protect us, like OCEA, what we are saying is protect us workers in the workplace so that we have a protection to act in our own defense, our own behalf. So I'm going to see how that works.

RK: Alot of people at this conference were talking about politics on a local and state level as being the place to focus and you seem to have had fairly good success with a combination of courts and legislatures, so do you still see that as an effective strategy for working with farm workers?

RF: No, because things change. You can't ever put all of your hope in that. Just like we've learned that we can't use the feds anymore for anything. We're learning that in the state now because what has happened is that the other side organizes
and so we've never had the legislature. We had the Supreme Court. They are going after the Supremes now so we're losing them. We say, so where can we go now? What Caesar has said and I'm understanding it more and more and probably have to use both is that we have got to educate the consumers. If our issue is food and people eat food, we have got to educate consumers and that's where if we get enough educated consumers out there, they are the ones that are going to change through the marketplace. They are the ones that are going to change the way things happen through the marketplace. We cannot expect it out of the government. And that's a different concept. Caesar said, look, in the marketplace, you don't need fifty percent plus one vote. All you need is ten percent profit margin. If we can affect ten percent of the profit margin, we can change things much quicker. Last time he was here, I said let's talk about that a little bit. Let's take a community issue here. Let's take police brutality. How would you change police brutality through the use of the boycott? We didn't get real far into it but he said you can change it through boycott. He said what you do is you go after the supporters of whoever, the police chief or city council or whatever. Who is it that is going to make a decision to curb police brutality? You go after who supports them and you boycott them. He says, I think everything can be resolved in the marketplace. And you
can have a quicker turnaround in the marketplace than in government and I know that's true. I have tried to work with EPA. We have tried to work with EPA for all these years because they are the ones that say yes or no on pesticides and we don't have an impact on them because they are too much in the hands of the industry, of growers and of the chemical industry. So, how do we over here have an impact on them? I don't think we do.

RK: So what is the strategy to raise consciousness among the consumers about the different issues and get them to selectively buy or not buy?

RF: It also cuts across. When you do education on boycott for the last five years, people learn how to use their money. This is really what we want them to do. Of course we always have a new crop of people that we have to educate and it is amazing how time flies because I go to universities and talk to these kids and they don't know anything.

RK: No they don't. You wonder what their parents are teaching them.

RF: It is an ongoing educational process. I really believe in boycotts. Two days ago one of the black leaders in the community called for boycott of all the white companies in Austin. It was too off the cuff. She's known for doing that kind of stuff. But, right now we have such a problem in the minority community. There's such a great problem of
unemployment, of gangs and just alot of things. How do we get the attention of the powers? And I believe that the powers that be are the people who have the money. How do we get their attention? How do we say redirect some of your efforts and lets make a real honest effort in solving the problems in this community. How do we do it? I don't think that we do it through the vote. I really don't. I think the message can be brought clearly through economics. If the white industries or whatever industries or businesses suffer today some because money from the minorities didn't come in, they would say if they do this again it will hurt us so maybe we should start looking at them a little bit more.

RK: Ten percent is alot.

RF: That's what it is, ten percent. We have an impact fifteen percent, it's a killer. So that's not a hellava lot of money or that's not a hellava lot of people either. If we could get that public educated. The reason I think my going and being part of your meeting last week, but I've also been participating in SOC, Southern Organizing Committee, I have been going to the south for the last month every weekend. I was in Jackson last weekend. I met up with the Mace guys there. The reason I think that is so important is because I think the south, and I'm talking about the southern blacks, and maybe I'm generalizing too much, have a real good history of boycotts. I don't think that people in the state of Texas
know that too much. It has sort of been ingrained. That thing about the bus boycott, how can anybody forget that?

RK: Boycott is a strategy in alot of these small towns people are using. There is a big grocery store that is not cashing checks or not hiring any blacks for cashier jobs or something, if they can organize a boycott they can make a difference in a week when you can make the people change a little bit.

RF: We tried to get a boycott going in one of the stores here because, I joined the blacks in that community, they had fired the black manager in a way that we thought was real unfair. So we went and by and large the black community was real supportive. But only for a couple of days and then they started petering back in. The problem I think is the middle class. I really do. Middle class whatever - blacks, Mexicans, whatever. Middle class has a vested interest and I don't know if it is in their own feelings about where they are in the mainstream or what or they have been educated too much or in that they are part of the system. I don't know what it is but I saw that the middle class was harder to deal with.

RK: That's an even tougher target.

RF: It is because they have all of these arguments. Poor people know - you can tell them, they got his job. That hits you in the gut. Or they don't pay us decent wages. We'll go
somewhere else. Poor people are good except if they've got a deal going on that grocery store that is better, they are not going to cross a picket line. They'll say, look Rebecca, they've got beans on sale here that are the cheapest. How can you argue with that? So, okay go ahead and buy your beans but get out of here and don't buy anything else. It is really based on economics. If we understood that real well and we knew how to do the boycott real well, then we could change alot of stuff I think. This country runs on money and there is no doubt about it.

RK: What another strategy in Texas, and I guess Jim Hightower is the person who has talked about this the most, developing cooperatives, actually turning farm workers into farmers or at least moving in that direction - setting up small scale farming becoming more like your family - moving back in time in a way? Have you thought about that much? Has this whole kind of movement in Texas been very effective and has it had a positive relationship on farm workers?

RF: We started doing that a couple of years ago. We started a farm worker co-opt where we were doing our own farm, organic, an organic farm. But the system isn't there for co-opts. It is not there for poor co-opts. They do not have any money, any resources and I'm not only talking about the market system but I'm talking about the foundations. You know how foundations are real don't want to do long term commitments,
they do one shot deals and they don't want to buy things and we need things and we need long term commitment. We need some support and we need people to understand that we are going to make mistakes. Everybody wants to see successes in terms of the bottom line. I am talking about where you made money at the end of the year and that's not going to happen for a number of years. We are having a hellava hard time in south Texas with our co-opt. One is that it is real easy for the farm workers to go back to their old ways. It is so hard to deal with a new idea. We started with an organic farmer from Minnesota, English speaking guy who didn't speak a word of Spanish. He came down. He was real smart and he gave us alot of good ideas but he didn't have alot of respect from the farm workers so he left. So we have a farm worker right now who is managing the farm but because he doesn't keep getting information on how to do organic stuff, he's slipping, going back to what he's known all of this life. We are right now struggling to find a Spanish speaker, small organic farmer that will help us learn the trade very well. There is one man, we understand, in California who we might get. He is a farmer from Wahoka who is doing organic farming but we have to bring him over, pay for his way. Everything is money and we don't have it. What I fault is we are poor, we don't have any resources, that means we don't have a tractor, we don't have a refrigerated truck to transport the
stuff. Everything is just against us. I hate to think that we are such victims but at some point we have got to have a hand. Somebody's got to give us a hand, to give us something. I know co-opts are built on people forking over five hundred bucks to join in but we don't have five hundred dollars to fork in. So, it's very hard and I guess I'm coming to the conclusion that we are either going to make a big strong effort in the next couple of years and see where we are and then we are going to make a decision as to whether we will continue it or not. Alot of effort, alot of energy is being put into this. I really don't know, but it's a good idea but the elements aren't there for us.

RK: When you look at Jack Gieger, John Hatch and L.C. Dorsey the project, when they had this co-operative and they really had things working and going. They had tractors. The breaking point for them was they needed to buy a canning machine, a big piece of equipment, so that they could can the vegetables. They were trying to market soul food into Chicago from Mississippi and they needed a canner for beans.

If they had gotten that they had already developed a market, they might have actually made this thing go and they didn't have the money and they couldn't find anybody to loan it to them. The foundations in the government wouldn't do it because it was a piece of capital equipment. They basically lost their co-opt because they needed to grow and be able to
bring some money in from outside.

RF: If we could get a break in that area, foundations to look at that, and also long term commitment rather than a one shot deal, it would be a big change in whether we succeed or don't succeed. This friend of ours who is working in the valley said she found some money from this thing called food production. It's really down our alley for farm workers. It's up to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. I don't know who that is with, office of community services or something like that? So anyway, she is writing a proposal today trying to get some of that paid but also we are trying to get JTPA money to pay for the farm workers as trainees and then maybe get from California to be the trainer to have him, if we can fund him for a long period of time. But, JTPA only funds for six months. Nothing works in terms of long-term commitment. Nothing does. And there is so much money for migrant seasonal farm workers that has been handed down by the feds. But when you look at the long-term effect of changes on the whole idea of the work, it is not there. People have gotten out, I'll grant that, but in terms of changing the way that work is it hasn't. I think it is reasoned that way.

RK: It is hard to see it without greater political power and economic power, its hard to see how its going to change on its own.
RF: It's not, they don't want it to change. Like for example this, if we were able to make this thing work, I was reading an article that came out on a study just done recently about the Valley farmers co-opt. This is a co-opt of small farmers that Hightower put together. It said that they are having trouble because of the freeze. We had a freeze awhile back. Those guys lost, they couldn't go back for loans because they had a bad record and so they started off with fifty something farmers in the co-opt, they are down now to thirty and those other guys have gone back and are dealing with the growers because it is there, it's easier. It is easier for them to be picked up by those guys than to be picked up by our own. Isn't that amazing? You tell me that's not reasoned out. So they are having a hard time, the small farmer co-opt that Hightower put together. And we are going to have the same problem, I know we are.

RK: One of the last series of questions I always ask is in terms of this whole issue of developing and training new leaders and where you think you are effective in that and where we need to think better about how we are doing it in all kinds of different organizations. How conscious are you of trying to train people and trying to make them aware? That has been a part of the strategy I think of the union over the years, training people and bringing new people in. It has been one of the better organizations for doing that.
RF: It is a concerted effort on our part to do that and very difficult. Actually, one of the reasons why Caesar does the college tours is because college students are more probably apt to get into something like a union and are not so shackled by baggage that older people have to get into something like that. We have had allot of people come through and go out again. South Texas does not have the glamour though that working for Caesar does. And so we have a hard time finding students or anybody to work for us. What's probably been good for us is that we have developed farm workers to do all the work for the union so right now in south Texas except for the attorney who is from Maine, everyone who works in the valley is a farm worker from the valley. So the long-term commitment is real good there. We don't have the turnover that probably the union in California has. We have one young woman from the University of Wisconsin who has come down. Wisconsin in Madison has been instead of doing spring break they take kids to the valley and they work with us. We have about fifteen kids every spring break for ten days. These are young students who have been selected by a committee of people who look at your qualities - what is your interest - so we don't get a bunch of yuppies down there trying to get a suntan. They do go up and down, they know they are going to work and they are real committed, they want to see what is going on and they are
really a good group of kids. Out of that group, we have one young woman who is working with us now and she is doing some of the organic farm. She has a long-term commitment. She is not just going to go down there for two or three months. That's always a real need for us in terms of educating people to take on that kind of commitment, that kind of job. We don't pay anything so you have to have something that benefits that person and that is commitment, doing something for a larger group of people, seeing changes. I think that working in south Texas and working with the union where we are unencumbered by bureaucratic or government policy about what we do, you are able to do more changes than in other jobs that people have. And you know, me and my husband and the staff that worked in the union in south Texas we have made more changes on the face of Texas than I would have ever thought when I was young. The impact that a small group of committed people can have is astronomical.

RK: You have to work hard at it.

RF: You do, but you can, if you have the commitment and you know how to go about doing it. I don't think you can do it alone. I've never thought you could do it alone. You have to have an organization and that is why I have always worked out of organizations, of membership organizations not bureaucracies. That's the only way you can change things. If you are out there batting your gums by yourself, saying this is a great
need, I mean everybody knows these are great needs, you are not going to change it unless you have an organization behind you.

RK: And those organizations need to, in different parts of the country in the south, be able to work together and communicate.

RF: Exactly. We are doing that SOC conference in New Orleans in the winter. I am going to take a bunch of farm workers up there. If for nothing else, I firmly believe for them to see that black people are struggling on the same kinds of issues that they are struggling over. So they can see that connection that we are all in the same boat here and we've got to be able to make relationships with other people so that we can change this stuff.

RK: Are there many mountain people working on SOC from Appalachia?

RF: There's one mine worker from Appalachia who's working on it. I think he's from Kentucky - Premium, Kentucky.

RK: I think that is right. If people can see that and can take groups and make them meet, not just the leaders but rank and file people too.

RF: I'm not for taking leaders anymore. I think the rank and file, if they are as hard working as I think they are, I think leaders are already overwhelmed with work, if the rank and file go and see, they have an impact on all kinds of other organizations. They can go back and say we went here, we saw
this and we believe we've got to do some of these things. That's how they spread the word. So I'm going to do that. I'm going to get some money from somebody and I'm going to take a van load. We are going to have a good time.

RK: It will be a good experience.

RF: Yes, it is going to be a great experience for them all.

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RF: