Good morning. This is Mark Shelstad, it is October 14th, 2016, and we're delighted to have CSU alum Manuel Ramos here for an oral history interview for the University Archives. Mr. Ramos, could you please share with us some of your background, such as where and when you were born and why you decided to come to CSU?

Sure Mark, I'd be happy to. I was born March 6, 1948, down in the small town of Florence, Colorado. Down south on the banks of the Arkansas River. The place itself was a rural country town, 3000 people lived in it. It had a mixed population of Mexican-Americans, Italians, Eastern Europeans. Most of the men worked in the mines or the steel mill in Pueblo or construction work. The women were pretty much homemakers as they used to call them in those days, or were waitresses, had those kinds of jobs. And all of us, especially the Mexicans, worked in the fields around Florence, Canon City...

I remember one summer we went and picked peaches in Palisade, things like that... it was a good place to grow up and that's where I learnt my love for reading and... I have some pretty good memories about Florence. I finished high school in Colorado Springs. My father moved us there when I was about 14 because of his work, he was a construction worker and he got tired of driving back and forth between Florence and Colorado Springs. I went to a high school, Harrison High in Colorado Springs. That's where I got a lot of support from one of my teachers, Treva French, who encouraged me to write and be creative. So I followed up on that.

I went to CSU... part of the reason was that I got pretty good scholarships from up here to go to CSU. There were a number of schools I was considering. I had pretty good grades in high school, a pretty good academic record, so I did have a few choices. But my parents and I visited the campus and we liked what we saw. Several of my friends were coming up here too, so that had something to do with it.

So there were a variety of reasons why we chose CSU, and I ended up here in... I graduated from high school in 1966, so I came on campus right in the middle of the 60's. And it was quite an experience.

Did any family members attend CSU as well or did they choose other places?

You know I was, yeah I was pretty much first generation in my family. I had a cousin who was a year older than me and she went to college I think down in Pueblo. But pretty much we were the first ones in the family to go to college.
And since then my son and daughters have gone to school but they've gone to other places.

But I did have some good friends who were here. One of them, John Cole, he's also an alumnus, he was, he passed away a few years ago. But he was my roommate while we were up here, we lived together off campus after the freshman year and we had a pretty good college life while we were up here in Fort Collins.

Mark: Yeah. When you arrived at Fort Collins what was your impression of the city?

Manuel Ramos: Well, you know, coming from a small country town and then Colorado Springs, Fort Collins was very different from what I would have expected, and what we found... You got to remember the times, I mean these were the 1960's and the Summer of Love and the Anti-War Movement, the Civil Rights Movement were going full blow. And in 1968, 1969, I became very politically active on this campus. I had some issues with what was going on in the university and also in the city, you know at Fort Collins.

So I got involved in a few issues. There was a Civil Rights hearing that was conducted here in Fort Collins, I think it was '69. A part of that investigation was housing, and so I testified because I felt I had been discriminated against in the city of Fort Collins. Wasn't rented a place even though I knew it was available, and actually my roommate John, in one of the instances, I checked out a place and was turned down, told that it wasn't available. And then like an hour later John checked it and it was very available. But there was a big difference between John and me.

So there was that kind of stuff going on and the lifestyle that I was used to, this happens to all college students, you know, it was very different coming on campus and being very independent and trying to mature, trying to adapt. So there was all that going on, too. But in the university itself I quickly realized that there weren't that many Latino students on campus, and the few that I saw I tried to connect with. And so eventually there was a small group of us, about eight of us actually, who would get together periodically and talk about things that are going on on campus and talk about the issues that were going on around the world. This was the time of youthful revolution and it was happening everywhere. There was some of that going on here in Fort Collins. The Anti-War Movement was fairly active, Students for a Democratic Society, all of that was going on on campus. So we got involved in that and actually created our own group.

Mark: Okay. What was the name of that group?

Manuel Ramos: Well the first name was the Mexican-American Committee for Equality, MACE, and that was a little play on words. Mace was the tear gas that police used to quell protestors and so we thought we were being cute by calling our group
MACE. Eventually it developed into the United Mexican-American Students or UMAS, which was a nation-wide group although every chapter was independent. There wasn't any national organization but there were UMAS chapters all over the country in the late 60's, early 70's.

That group, the eight of us, as I recall, there were six Chicano students, one Chicana student, and one Native American woman. We talked about the issues, we talked about the changes that we thought, you know, we thought there should be more students of color, we thought there should be more relevant courses on campus, we thought that the university could do more to encourage recruitment of students of color and offer scholarships, tutoring, mentoring, actually recruit students. Go out there and try to find students.

So those were the burning issues for us and eventually we made written demands on the administration of CSU. Make some changes.

Mark: Okay great. Why did you choose your major here at CSU?

Manuel Ramos: Political science. Well I was thinking back then that I wanted to become an attorney and I did some checking, some research, and political science seemed like one of the degrees that kind of led into that. As I recall there wasn't really a pre-law major or anything like that here. But it wasn't really on my thinking, it hadn't really come together what I was going to do, but political science for me was very interesting. I liked the courses that were being offered under that major and it seemed very topical, very relevant to what was going on in my life and around the country. So I chose that. I considered, because I wanted also to write, I'd considered journalism and English and some of those kinds of majors, but I stuck with political science.

Mark: Yeah. Can you talk a little about some of the important faculty you met here at CSU?

Manuel Ramos: I'll have to think about that.

Mark: Okay.

Manuel Ramos: You know the names don't come to me real quick.

Mark: Okay.

Manuel Ramos: If I looked at a catalog or a list or something I could probably say a few things but...

Mark: Yeah.

Manuel Ramos: Sorry.
Mark: No. How about T.R. Young from sociology?

Manuel Ramos: Yeah, T.R. was a very influential faculty member on me personally and on a number of other students. You know he became the faculty adviser for the group, for MACE, and I think for the Black Student Alliance too. He was very active, very progressive, and was involved in a lot of things with students, and so he was kind of a... not a father figure but a leadership figure for the students. So we came to rely on him and many of us got to know him personally and his family and we interacted with him on a basis. We did the same with some other professors. I remember, I think it was [Hugh Reagan 00:10:36], I think he was on faculty, he was at least on staff, and he also opened up his house to students, invited us to come over and visit and talk about how things are going with us.

But T.R., he offered us real guidance and helped us, especially when it got pretty stressful on campus with all the protests and the police on campus and some of the protests turning violent. He was very helpful.

Mark: Okay, great. Can you talk about your relationship with Paul Chambers and the Black Student Alliance?

Manuel Ramos: Sure. Paul and I are friends, we've stayed friends all these years. Even though he travels all over, he's always going somewhere and I've been pretty much in Denver. But we communicate, we see each other, it's like we haven't really been separated from each other for a while. We pick up right where we left off, you know.

But Paul and I met... After MACE issued these demands to the administration, we really didn't get a response. We were kind of ignored, well we were ignored, not kind of ignored. We were ignored. And so that was very frustrating. But, as I said, it was a time of very real activism so there was always things going on and Paul and I met, probably at some meeting or at one of the protests or maybe even a social event. But we met and he was I think in the leadership of the Black Student Alliance, or at least he was active with that group. And they were talking about some of the same things we were. And so they issued their set of demands and we presented to the administration of CSU at that time a united front between the Black Student Alliance and MACE. And we finally got some attention. That's what it took.

And so Paul and I developed a relationship, we worked together. There's a lot of photos in the archives that show Paul and I rabble-rousing and giving speeches and at meetings together. So we worked very closely together and had some of the same goals... some of the same beliefs, and the urgent need that change had to be made and made quickly. I mean we were young and fairly radical for CSU I would say. So we developed that relationship and as I said, it continues to today.
Mark: Yeah, great. Can you describe what you hoped to accomplish with the demand that CSU participate in the boycott of grapes (Mr. Ramos laughs) and... yeah?

Manuel Ramos: Yeah. Well, in... Cesar Chavez had organized farm workers in California and before that in Arizona, and had worked for improving the condition of farm workers, because it was fairly pitiful, the situation of farm workers in this country. The people who pick our food and provide us all with things that we need were sorely underpaid and overworked and no real health concerns being provided for them, really bad housing... all these issues that exist because farm workers were typically very poor people. As I said, when I was a kid I worked a bit in the fields but I wasn't a migrant worker, you know, I had a house and to earn extra money we would go pick apples in Canon City or like I said, pick peaches in Palisade or my mother would take us out to pick onions and sow the fields in Canon.

I understood that was hard work. Back-breaking work. And the economic return wasn't all that great. But farm workers, migrant farm workers, that was their way of life. And so Chavez had organized, created what eventually became a union. And as part of their process to put pressure on the farm growers, on the growers themselves, had called for a boycott of some of the products that they will be picked, and grapes was one of the first ones. I remember, when I first started seeing boycott grapes, that struck me as very odd. Why would I want to boycott grapes? It just seemed like a strange thing coming from high school in Colorado Springs to CSU and reading about that and my horizons being expanded because I was in college. But we learned about it, we studied about it, and eventually we contacted the farm worker union representative that was assigned to Colorado, and we tried to encourage the university to also participate in the boycott. If the university would boycott grapes, that would mean much more than just a few students saying we weren't going to buy grapes at the grocery store any more.

So that was the goal. We wanted the university as an institution to support the farm workers and to say they would sign on for the boycott. And at that time, that was going on all over too. Cities were signing pledges to boycott grapes, major institutions, universities around the country were participating, so we felt that was something that we would want to try to do here at CSU. That was one of our first activities, actually, as a group, was to participate in that, do what we could. We set up a table here in the Student Center, not here but in the Student Center and handed out information that we got from the union about the union and the boycott... Tried to do what we could to support it.

Eventually we supported farm workers here in Colorado that were on strike. There was, um, people in the Kitagawa farms who picked... I think they were picking... they were working in greenhouses and were underpaid, so we supported them in Brighton and Fort Lupton. So that was really the beginning of our activism, was to support that kind of issue. And then we also, almost at the same time, a little bit later, we started talking about the issues at CSU.
Mark: Great, great. Were you involved with the recruitments of students to CSU through Project GO, after the legislature denied funding... for [crosstalk 00:17:52] recruitment?

Manuel Ramos: Right, you know. We issued the demands, we had several meetings that went on for several weeks. The back-and-forth between the student groups and the administration, a task force was set up that met and talked about all these issues and we went through a whole litany of things. One of the things that developed out of that was the... either the creation or the expansion of Project GO, it's a little fuzzy in my memory. Project GO Generating Opportunities is what that stood for and it was along the lines of what we believed the university should do, but it needed to be done on a larger scale to actually actively go out and recruit students of color who might not be thinking of college in the first place or CSU in particular. To go and recruit the students, see if financial aid was available, or at least tell the students how to go about trying to get financial aid. Just to do more, be more proactive.

When Project GO was actually set up and a director was appointed the first summer, some of us students took it upon ourselves to go out and do what we had been talking about. So Paul and I made some trips together, Dave Allen and I made some trips together, other alumni. Then what we would do, we would set up meetings with students in various places, so we would visit their homes or go to a school, talk to the students, talk to them about CSU, tell them what we could offer them. Talk about the financial aid. And encourage them that we would have people on campus that would help them with study habits and study groups and things like that.

Mark: Mm-hmm (affirmative), right.

Manuel Ramos: And we had some success.

Mark: Yeah. Great. What changes have you seen at CSU since you've graduated?

Manuel Ramos: (laughs) Well that was a long time ago, when I graduated, so. I mean, just the physical layout, of course, is so changed. It's a much more attractive campus, I've got to say.

After I graduated, it was several years before I came back and when I did the place looked in pretty bad shape. Some of the buildings were run down and... but since then it's really been improved. Been a major undertaking I assume, the rehabilitation of the buildings, but more importantly, the student body seems to be much more diverse. I heard some figures here, I was at the celebration of the anniversary for El Centro and the Black and African-American cultures there, that there are more than 3000 Latino students on campus now. Which is just amazing number. Like I said, when I was here, eight of us got together and there were more than eight Latino students but there were only eight of us who had enough consciousness, I guess, to get together as a group and talk about some
of these things and hang out with each other and form a community. We felt like we were the only eight students of color, except for the Black students, on campus.

But now there's a lot going on in terms of support for the students and having them know that they're not isolated, and a lot of assistance for them. So I think that's great, that's wonderful that there's so many students. What I was bothered by is the low graduation rate for students of color, but in particular for the Latino students. It's a very low number and I think there's a lot of work that needs to be done on understanding why and what we can do to improve that, and what needs to be done to make sure the students make it through the four or five years that's required to get a degree.

Mark: Yeah.

Manuel Ramos: But there's been a lot of changes. I really admire the work of Guadalupe Salazar, who's the director of El Centro, or Mary Ontiveros, the Vice President of Diversity. They really seem to be engaged in their work and passionate about what they're doing, and really in touch with the students.

Over the past few days I've been able to talk to several students and that's always good for the soul. Some of these students are very... well, they're idealistic, but they're also very conscientious, and they know what's happening, they understand some of the issues, and several that want to do something and want to make a difference, which is a great attitude to have when you're a college student.

Mark: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah.

Manuel Ramos: I'm encouraged but I know there's also a lot of work to do. There always is. These kinds of struggles never really end. There are still issues of education and immigration and health care. There's issues about the environment now and there's issues still about wars and the militaristic attitude of the United States towards the rest of the world. Some of that is just, we got to keep bringing it up and doing something about it, hopefully. Whatever we can.

Mark: Now that you've looked back, how do you view your time at CSU?

Manuel Ramos: Well it was very valuable to me and... you know, that's my youth and so we all have very fond memories, I think, of our youth and what we did. So I think it was a valuable experience. I met some people that changed my life, literally, and I did some things that I'm proud of. Overall, I think it was an excellent experience and I thank the institution for, firstly, for not throwing me out of school for some of the stuff I did, and letting me graduate.

It offered... and it was difficult for us, an institution like CSU in 1968 or 1969, to, as I said, when the, the Chicano students first made their presence known as a
group and made demands, we were ignored. That just showed some of the entrenched thinking that was still here in this institution. And so it was hard, I think, for the institution to change and to really start listening to some of us, because we hadn’t raised our voices before and whoever was running the place at that time wasn’t used to responding to students in this way. So we had to take steps that caught people’s attention and that frightened some people, and we were all subject to threats and warnings and some harassment by the police because of what we were doing. So that was all difficult and it was because this huge giant institution, we had to somehow get their attention and have them listen to us so that we can work together to try to make changes. So it took some steps that were out of the ordinary.

So that was difficult and I wish we hadn’t had to do some of those things, but that’s what it takes sometimes to change this thing. Slowly, the institution moved. Paul and I were not successful in everything, and not just Paul and I, but I mean our groups and the students that were gathered together. We weren’t successful in everything that we tried to accomplish. We got Project GO going. We couldn’t convince the rest of the student body to vote for the fee increase that would have funded some of these programs. I think we only wanted like 50 cents a student more per semester or something, I forget the details. But that was a referendum and what struck us all was first, the number of students who didn’t vote at all, didn’t care enough to even vote, and then we lost the vote among those who did vote. That was a defeat for us. We couldn’t convince the state legislature to really go out of their usual way and try to fund higher education, specifically to provide more assistance in the ways we wanted.

But we did get students from around the state to go to the state legislature and raise a united voice that some of these things needed to be done, so that was successful. And I think we left a bit of a legacy, if you want to call it that, of the activism and what we started continued, it’s now changed and it’s a little different, but it had its roots back then in the mid-60’s. So that was good. Still good.

**Mark:** How did your family view your political activism?

**Manuel Ramos:** (laughs) Well I come from, my mother was born in a small town outside of Florence called Chandler that doesn’t exist any more, it was a mining town. A large family with roots in that area. My father came from Mexico as a child, he was four or five, and then he grew up in the same area. You know, they were miners and construction workers and waitresses, and I’ve got to say they were very proud of me going to school, and they encouraged me to read and to do well in my education. I had some very good familial support. And I did some things up here at CSU that disappointed them on a personal level, you know, not the political stuff.

They never really criticized me for the politics, for the demonstrations or the protests. They didn’t always understand it and so we had to have conversations about it, and usually when I explained what was going on things were okay with
them, you know. So I didn't get any negative backlash for that kind of stuff, just all my other things of growing up, (laughs) those were problems.

Mark: Yeah. How did CSU prepare you for life after college?

Manuel Ramos: Well the diversity of the population of the people that I met was I think one of the biggest things. Interacting with different students from around the world, different political viewpoints, engaging in the process of debate and discussion and argument, that's a good preparation for what the real world's like. Some of the courses, I felt, especially with my literary stuff, with my writing career, I read several books and novels and authors that I might not have ever come across except for what was offered in some of the courses. I took a course called literature of social protest and I ran into people like Kerouac in that course, took a creative writing course and I can't remember the professor's name but I remember that, being a student of the 60's, I spent most of my time in the creative writing class arguing with the professor about what creative writing really was.

But that was part of the educational process that I appreciated at college. To think on my own and to analyze and be critical, and to try to understand what I was really reading in a different way than what I'd been accustomed to. So CSU did all that for me. I appreciate it.

Mark: What do you consider to be your proudest moment during your time here at CSU?

Manuel Ramos: Well, I guess it was when, after that first summer of '69, and then 70 was the year I was going to graduate, but the first students came to campus that we had recruited, they were part of the Project GO. And so there were actually people on campus that wouldn't have been there except for what we had done. We saw the fruits of some of the stuff that we had been doing for a couple of years by then. And we got together with these students and socialized and helped them with their courses and their classes and got to know who they were. Some of these people, I still connect with today. That was a proud moment, when we finally saw the flesh and blood of results of what we had been doing. That was good.

Mark: Great. Switching gears a little bit, can you talk a little bit about your career in law?

Manuel Ramos: Yeah. After I left CSU I went to the University of Colorado in Boulder law school, and when I became a lawyer, for a while Dave Allen and I had our own office. We worked out of Longmont for a while and then Denver. We did that for a couple of years and then we decided to go work for Legal Services, the legal aid programs. At that time there was a program in Denver called the Legal Aid Society of Metropolitan Denver. I went to work for them as a staff attorney in one of the neighborhood offices, and Legal Aid is a program that provides
attorneys in civil cases, not criminal cases, for folks who can't afford an attorney. So it's usually the indigent or senior citizens or people with disabilities, and they're facing issues like domestic violence, eviction, foreclosure, consumer issues. And many of these issues are very serious, they're in a crisis when they come to the Legal Aid. We're really attorneys of last resort.

So I worked for that program for many years. Eventually it became Colorado Legal Services, a state-wide program. All the various Legal Aid programs around the country merged into one program. I eventually became the director of advocacy, deputy director for Colorado Legal Services and I worked there until I retired, now two years ago. We had 15 offices around the state, we employed about 50 attorneys that did this kind of work, and I'm very proud of that organization. It does excellent work. The people are very committed. It is stressful, it's intense, it can be... the attorneys are the kind of folks who empathize very much with their clients, and so it's hard not to take some of that on at a personal level. And they try their damnedest to get some justice for the folks, help them out in some way, and actually save their lives in the issues of domestic violence, just getting them into shelter and making sure that they're safe, the victims and their families.

So they do great work and I felt very satisfied at a professional level that that's where I ended up, in Legal Services doing that kind of work, and I still miss it, even a couple of years after I'm retired. What I miss is the fact that problems are really being solved and actually doing something for somebody else that matters. So it's a good organization.

Mark: Yeah, great. Great. And switching gears one more time too, how did you transition into being a writer and starring in mysteries?

Manuel Ramos: It all came about because I was a reader. As a kid, I read everything that I could get my hands on. In the little library in Florence, eventually they got to know me so well there that they just let me read whatever I wanted to read. So I found at an early age classic American crime fiction, like Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain... people like that. And so, reading as much as I could, eventually I wanted to create that for somebody else.

So I started writing things as a kid, little character sketches of my family. And I did that, I did some of that up here you know, I wrote some stories and pieces, and I took the courses that I thought would help with trying to learn how to become a writer and develop the skills or whatever I had as a writer. I had great encouragement from a high school teacher at Harrison who validated what I was doing.

So I did that, but when I went to law school it stopped. Law school was such a different experience and a new way of thinking, and the writing we were doing was anything but creative. They didn't want you to be creative, in fact. So that part of me went on hold and it wasn't until about a dozen years after I became a lawyer that I went back to it.
By that time, I had been doing it for a while and was a little burned out, and I needed something to get the juices flowing again. So I wrote a story about a burned out Chicano attorney, which seemed pretty natural to do, you know, and it was published. And so I went back to it. That attorney in that short story eventually became a protagonist in my first novel The Ballad of Rocky Ruiz, which was about a lawyer and actually the background is he used to be an activist in college and 20 years later he's reflecting on all that, and because it's a mystery, you know, the lawyer's best friend back in college had been killed. And there was always an official version of what happened but he was never satisfied with that. So 20 years later, in the midst of his mid-life angst, he realizes he's got to go back to those days and figure out what really happened and what happened to his friend, to get a little peace.

So that's what the book is about, and it got published and got me a contract, and now I've just recently published my ninth novel and one collection of short stories. Some of them are about that lawyer, and now I have a new character from Denver, who's from the streets of Denver and is adapting to all the changes that are going on. I hope to keep writing that, write a few more stories about that guy.

Mark: Yeah, great.

Manuel Ramos: Yeah.

Mark: Do you have anything else you'd like to add about your time here at CSU, or...?

Manuel Ramos: Uh... Well, you know, I got asked at this event that I did here last night by some students, if I had any... because of my experiences here, if I had any ideas for them. And, you know, I was impressed with them, with what they were doing and what they were thinking, and so I told them that, you know. They didn't need to hear from me, they had their own motivation, they had their own momentum, and they needed just to recognize they were a community and they could move forward. And so I think that's part of what I remember about CSU, when I was here, is that even though we came here isolated and it was all pretty strange to us and we felt like we were alone, we did come together and we created some lifelong friendships. Because this institution offered us the place to do that.

And so we naturally gravitated towards each other and were able to do things that were fun, you know. We had a lot of fun together, we had a lot of good times. We had some serious things. That's the way I remember CSU, I think in general, is that it gave us that opportunity to do that, and we took advantage of it, so... it worked out.

Mark: Okay. Great.

Manuel Ramos: Okay?
Mark: Yeah. Any further comments on your time here at CSU?

Manuel Ramos: Oh, I don't think so. That's probably it.

Mark: Manuel Ramos, thank you for your time today. We greatly appreciate it.

Manuel Ramos: Thank you, Mark. That was fun (laughs).