

Field Notes

NARRATOR: MICHELE MARTINEZ
INTERVIEWER: Dianna Lopez
DATE: July 8, 2015
LOCATION: Santa Ana City Hall, Santa Ana, California
PROJECT: Women, Politics, and Activism Since Suffrage

Michele Martinez is one of two women currently sitting on the Santa Ana City Council. She was also one of the youngest members ever elected to the council. She was first elected at the age of twenty-seven in 2006, and is in the midst of her third and final term. Martinez is also president of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials [NALEO], Director of the Alliance for a Healthy Orange County [AHOC], vice president, (and soon-to-be-president), of Southern California Association of Governments [SCAG], and sits on several boards and civic councils.

I first reached Michele by mailing a letter to her council office. I informed her about the Women, Politics, and Activism Oral History Project and asked for her participation. Not expecting to hear back, I received an email from her a couple weeks later and was very excited. Although Michele is still holding office (typically the project prefers women in politics to be retired), we made an exception for her due to her upcoming busy schedule over the next year. It was now or never, and Michele was too good to pass up. After a few emails, she had her assistant, Gail Woods, call and set up a time to interview. Michele was gracious enough to invite me to the Santa Ana City Hall offices to conduct the interview. Being told Michele was an “early bird,” we agreed that 9AM was a good time to start, and I would be allotted two hours, a very generous amount of time considering just how busy Michele is.

I arrived at city hall about ten minutes before nine. Having videotaped an interview with Mayor Miguel Pulido a couple months before, I was very familiar with where to park and where to locate the offices. Remembering that the mayor wore a suit and tie, and assuming most elected officials dressed in the same vein, I decided to wear a very professional black suit. I parked my car, grabbed the recorder, and headed up to the eighth floor. I checked into the lobby with just a few minutes to spare. I was told by the secretary to pick up a courtesy phone which would inform Gail that I was there.

A couple minutes later Gail came out to greet me. Simultaneously, Michele arrived right behind me. She smiled and extended her hand. Her other hand was holding her cell phone as she caught up on Facebook comments regarding recent news that Latinos had become the majority in California. As we walked to her conference room, I was struck by Michele’s casual appearance

and demeanor. She wore ripped jeans, a sleeveless blouse with sandals, and her long brown hair flowed past her shoulders.

She was very personable and courteous, so I felt comfortable immediately, and was not intimidated by her title (which was something she emphasized later in her interview, that status does not make you better than anyone). I soon realized that Michele was the same age as me, and we were originally from the same area of Los Angeles, so that also played a factor in my comfort level with her. Once seated in the room, he pulled out one of her business cards and handed it to me. At that moment, I realized I'd carelessly forgotten mine in the car. She also asked if I'd like any water, which I declined, telling her that she would be doing most of the talking. I asked her to fill out the paperwork, which she gladly did, while I set up the recorder. Before we began I gave her my usual speech, which included not answering any questions she didn't feel comfortable answering. She told me, "No problem, I'm an open book." And with that we got started.

Immediately I knew Michele was unique in that she did not have the typical background one would expect from a city councilmember. She overcame a great deal of adversity in her life. She never knew her father, her mother was a prostitute and drug addict, she was raised in a poor neighborhood, taken in, along with several other cousins, and raised by her great-grandmother. She was mentored by a businessman in Santa Ana, who changed the direction of her life, a man named Mark Press. She eventually received her college degree by matriculating through Santa Ana College and Cal State Fullerton, realizing that education was her only way out. She seized the opportunity to run for city council in 2006. Her campaign was very grassroots with little money, so she hit the streets and knocked on thousands of doors. Although she won the election, and several prestigious appointments, Michele has never celebrated her victories, something I thought was very sad.

Throughout her career, Michele has been outspoken and courageous, characteristics that have put her in hot water with other councilmembers and Mayor Pulido. Due to these contentions, she has made it clear that she will step down in 2018, and move back to her native Los Angeles to continue her civic work.

Michele was very candid from the start of the interview. Her answers were detailed and thorough, so much so that as I saw eleven o'clock approaching I was worried that I wouldn't get to all my questions. The one thing I wasn't able to ask her about was her attempted run for State Assembly in 2012. But every other topic was pretty well covered. We wound up finishing at about 11:15, and Michele immediately had to go to her next meeting.

We exited the building together. As we rode down the elevator I thanked her and told her I was very moved by her story. We chatted about where we both came from and talked about local officials in that area. I lightheartedly told her if she ever ran for office in that area—where I was still registered—that she had my vote. She was very grateful for the interview and told me what a pleasure it was. I walked out to my car and waved goodbye to her, hoping that she'd find reasons to celebrate in the near future. She truly deserves it.