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A eulogy for a Chicano who means so much to American history

Mario T. García | Apr. 29, 2013 NCR Today

On Thursday, I had the honor to speak at the funeral Mass of Sal Castro. Castro, as I wrote in my last blog [1], was a major historical figure who inspired his Chicano students in the East Los Angeles public schools to stage a massive student strike for one week in March 1968. This strike came to be known as the "blowouts," or walkouts, and were a seminal moment in the history of the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the largest and most widespread civil rights and empowerment movement by Mexican Americans in U.S. history. But Sal was also a devoted teacher for four decades inspiring several generations of Chicano/Latino students to work hard, go to college and to be "change makers," as Sal called them.

Sal's rosary service and funeral Mass held at the cathedral in downtown Los Angeles attracted hundreds of community activists, Latino political leaders and former students. Sal before his death had planned his own funeral services to include magnificent Mexican music and religious traditions. He requested speakers at his Mass who could speak to the various aspects of his life as a teacher, educational activist and organizer of the Chicano Youth Leadership Conference. He asked that I speak to his place in history.

Sal collaborated with me in writing his life story in *Blowout! Sal Castro and the Chicano Struggle for Educational Justice [2]*. My eulogy was well received and, in fact, elicited even a standing ovation when I noted that Sal Castro was not only a major figure in Chicano history but in American history. This is what Sal as a history teacher had advocated for years, that Chicanos and other Latinos be recognized as major participants in American history and be integrated into the U.S. history canon. In that reaction, the Chicanos/Latinos present symbolically took over the cathedral. It was an expression of "Chicano power" and of "We are church." That reaction to my words was not for me, but for Sal. Even the priests rose in applause. What follows is my eulogy that I want to share with readers:

About 15 years ago, I invited Sal Castro to speak to my Chicano history class at UC Santa Barbara. My students and I were enthralled with the power of his voice, the humanity that he projected, and that wonderful humor. I knew then that I had to write his story. That story testifies to Sal's place in history, and it is an honored place.

Very few of us have the opportunity to make history that affects others' lives. Sal Castro did that. He did that by first of all dedicating his career to being a teacher. There is nothing Sal would not do for his students. He did this for four decades and touched the lives of countless young people.

Sal made history by the inspirational and courageous leadership that he provided his kids, as he called them, in the 1968 "blowouts," or walkouts, in the east Los Angeles schools, the largest high school student strike in American history. I do not believe that the blowouts would have occurred without Sal's leadership. He put his career and perhaps even his life on the line for the students in this movement. He didn't do it because he personally wanted publicity or rewards. He did it because of the injustices of an educational system that for decades had denied Mexican-American students a quality education and an opportunity to go to college. Sal Castro took on the entire educational establishment because they did not care about his kids.

He knew that real change does not come from on top from the elite but from the bottom, from the people. In

1968, it was senior and junior high school students who through Sal came to recognize that they were not the problem, nor were their parents the problem for their lack of educational achievement. Sal helped open their eyes that it was the schools -- too many teachers, too many principals and too many members of the board of education -- who were the problem. Sal taught them that there was no "Mexican problem," but instead a racist problem as it affected the schools and the Mexican American community. Because of Sal, the students -- the blowout generation, as Sal called them -- empowered themselves. They were not going to accept anything now but a good education so that they could advance as far as their personal talents would take them. Sal knew he had achieved this change in consciousness as he saw hundreds of students walk out of Lincoln High School and Roosevelt High School and Garfield High School and Wilson High School and Belmont High School and other high schools in other parts of Los Angeles. He knew that it would never be the same, and he was right. With tears in his eyes and pride in his very being many years later, he said of that day in 1968:

"As the bell rang, out they went, out into the streets. With their heads held high, with dignity. It was beautiful to be a Chicano that day."

In that first week of March 1968, with thousands of high school students on strike, history was made by the students, the college students who helped, the brown berets who provided defense and Sal. They brought the educational establishment to its knees. They showed what Chicano power meant.

Various reforms followed, but they were never enough and still not enough even today. But Sal and the students showed that week that major social change can only happen when the people themselves realize that only they can make the changes that will improve their lives. This was the lesson of the blowouts and the lessons of the Chicano movement. It was the lesson that Sal as a teacher taught that generation and continues to teach us today and in the future.

Sal Castro was first and foremost a teacher, but as a teacher, he made history not only through the blowouts but by year after year producing students who would dedicate their lives in whatever profession they pursued to go out and fulfill the legacy of his blowout kids -- to change the world. Sal never rested on his laurels. There were still too many kids that he needed to reach, which he did not only in his classes but through his unselfish work in inspiring new generations of future Chicano/Latino leaders by his Chicano Youth Leadership Conference.

Sal Castro is a giant in Chicano history and also needs to be recognized as a giant in American history. He showed us that real education is different from schooling. Schooling produces students who accept the status quo and never ask, "Why?" Education produces students who not only ask "why" but act on their question.

I personally will miss a colleague, a fellow teacher and a dear friend. I will miss him coming to my classes, as he did for many years, never asking for compensation but always with the same passion, wanting to share his story with students. I often joked that if Sal couldn't show up, I could give Sal's talk because I had heard it so often. And now I will give that talk by myself, but I also rededicate myself today to his mission in life and will teach others about Sal Castro and his place in history.

The last question I asked Sal is, "How do you wish to be remembered?" He simply said: "I want my tombstone to read: Sal Castro: a teacher." He added in concluding his story, and he is saying this to us today, "Que dios les bendiga y que la virgen morena les proteja."

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[1] http://ncronline.org/node/49866

[2] http://www.amazon.com/Blowout-Chicano-Struggle-Educational-Justice/dp/0807834483/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1366214049&sr=8-1&keywords=Blowout%21+Sal+Castro+and+the+Chicano+Struggle+for+Educational+Justice