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Teacher who inspired Chicano students' 'blowouts' dies

by Mario T. García

NCR Today

Monday was a sad day, with the horrible bombing at the Boston Marathon. It was also a sad day for me because the death of Sal Castro.

Sal was a major figure in Chicano history. As a public school teacher in the east Los Angeles schools, Sal in March of 1968 inspired his students to participate in a historic student walkout of the schools in what came to be known as the "blowouts."

The students were protesting a legacy of racial segregation and discrimination in the public school system against Mexican-American students not only in Los Angeles but throughout the Southwest, where the majority of people of Mexican descent lived. In the early 20th century, these schools were referred to as "Mexican schools." They were segregated public schools for Mexican-American children, and they were inferior schools characterized by limited education aimed at teaching the students to work with their hands rather than their minds. The schools had fewer grades than the white or Anglo schools, a lack of expectations by teachers, overcrowded classrooms, lack of books, etc.

Despite efforts by Mexican Americans to change these conditions over the years, the legacy of the Mexican schools was alive and well in the east LA schools in 1968. As one of the few Mexican-American or Chicano teachers in these schools, Castro knew and opposed such conditions. He also came to understand that only a dramatic action would pressure the educational establishment to do something about these conditions. But more importantly, he knew only the students could do this by first recognizing that they were not the problem -- the schools were the problem.

Castro worked with the students to develop a critical consciousness that further recognized that the schools as constituted were not there to help them but to limit their opportunities so they could be recycled as cheap labor like their parents. The development of this critical consciousness Castro believed

represented real education as opposed to the regimented "schooling" that the students received and only intended to produce submissive citizens who would not question the inequalities in the American system.

Armed with this more critical consciousness and inspired by Castro's leadership, the students went on strike in what may be the largest high school student strike in American history. Some 20,000 students walked out of 15 schools in the first week of March 1968 in the blowouts. Their strike eventually led to various reforms, though even today education in inner-city schools leaves much to be desired.

What the walkouts really changed was the consciousness of the students. They recognized it was within their power to produce social change. No one else could do it but themselves. They empowered themselves by their actions, and Sal Castro was largely responsible for this. The blowouts were a seminal moment in the history of the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, the largest and most widespread Mexican-American civil rights and empowerment movement in U.S. history. The movement made for the first time Chicanos and other Latinos into major national political actors, and we are seeing the fruits of that movement today in the rise of Latino political power.

Sal Castro paid a price for his leadership and courage by putting his own career on the line for his students. He and 12 others were arrested after the blowouts and became known as the East LA 13. They were indicted on conspiracy charges and, if convicted, might have served more than 50 years in jail. After a two-year legal battle, a court ruled that the blowouts constituted an expression of First Amendment rights, and Castro and the others were cleared of all charges. School officials continued to harass Castro, but he continued to dedicate himself to teaching for the next three decades until his retirement.

I was privileged and honored to write Sal's life story in my 2011 book, *Blowout! Sal Castro and the Chicano Struggle for Educational Justice*. We worked for more than 10 years on this project, and I conducted some 50 hours of taped interviews with Sal. It was a pleasure and a learning experience to have spent so much time with him and listen to his stories. Sal had a great sense of humor, but he used humor to educate. He could also get very serious when he talked about the courage of his "kids" who engaged in the blowouts: the blowout generation.

When the book came out, our publisher was generous in providing us with funding to promote the book. We visited many campuses and bookstores and had a wonderful time together. I presented the "teaser" opening, then Sal did his thing and had the audience in the palm of his hand. Sal also spoke in many of my classes at UC Santa Barbara, and many students over the last 10 years and more had the opportunity to meet him. When the book came out, the students read about his story growing up in LA, going to both public and Catholic schools, being in the military, returning to go to college, his early teaching career, his involvement in the blowouts, the repercussions he faced, and his many more years as a devoted teacher. I believe my students were as inspired by Sal as I was.

I'm pleased that through my book -- which now also includes an e-book with all kinds of video interviews with Sal, videos of him speaking to conferences and more valuable materials -- that future generations will know who Sal Castro was. He was the epitome of what it means to be a teacher, and we surely today need teachers like Sal. But he is also someone who made history -- American history -- and he needs to be recognized as a major figure in American educational and civil rights history.

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One of the last questions I had for Sal for our book was, "How do you want to be remembered?" He simply said: "I would like my tombstone to read: 'Sal Castro -- A teacher.'"

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