Interviewee: Dr. Jacob Perea

Interviewer: Dr. Baligh Ben Taleb, Dr. Grace Yoo

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Bio:

Born in Las Cruces, New Mexico in 1941. Where he attended elementary, middle school and high school. He went to college at New Mexico State University, and did a dual degree, or a joint degree, one in biological sciences and one in Music. He then joined the Peace Corps and travelled to teach in Nigeria for a year, then Ghana, and Tanzania. Perea joined SF State as a teacher during the Civil Rights Movement for two years (1968-1970) and then in 1977 as a professor of Administration and Interdisciplinary studies in the College of Education. In 1985, he co-founded the Step to College Program at SF State to encourage disadvantaged students to attend and remain in college. Perea earned a bachelor's degree from New Mexico State University, a master's in education from SF State and an educational doctorate from University of California, Berkeley. His research has focused on Latino, African American and American Indian public school graduation rates and access to higher education.

Abstract:

This interview explores the life and career of Jacob Perea, highlighting his journey from Las Cruces, New Mexico, to San Francisco State University (SFSU). Perea shares his background, including his parents' heritage and his upbringing in Las Cruces (0:32). He discusses his education at New Mexico State University, where he studied biological sciences and music, and his time playing violin in various orchestras and mariachi bands (2:21-3:14). Perea's narrative includes his experiences in the Peace Corps in Nigeria, Ghana, and Tanzania, emphasizing his teaching roles and cultural immersion (4:02-7:16).

Upon returning to the United States, Perea describes his involvement in the Teacher Corps program at SFSU and his participation in the 1968-69 San Francisco State College Strike, focusing on community and educational activism (7:37-9:00). He recounts his work establishing the first community-controlled high school on the Navajo Reservation and his efforts to address student suicides on the Hickory Apache Reservation by reintroducing cultural practices (9:29-12:07).

Perea then discusses his role in developing a bilingual teacher training program at SFSU, highlighting the program's structure and languages offered (12:27-13:32). He reflects on his involvement with the Mission Coalition and his interactions with the Black Panthers during the strike era (14:16-15:49).

The interview concludes with Perea's insights into the challenges and successes of integrating ethnic studies into the SFSU curriculum, the leadership of key figures like Jim Hirabayashi and Phil, and the political dynamics of the time (18:04-24:06).

This comprehensive account underscores Jacob Perea's dedication to education, cultural preservation, and community empowerment throughout his multifaceted career.

Transcription:

Settings (0:00)

Baligh Ben Taleb: Thank you so much for being here. It's such an honor to meet with you finally. I've learned a bit about you and I'm so excited about the conversation today. If you could start by telling us a little about where you grew up and your journey to San Francisco State.

Jacob Perea: Okay, I'll try to not make it as long a journey as it has been because we don't have enough time. I was born in southern New Mexico; a town called Las Cruces. It's close to Puerto Paris, so Mexico is right there. Depending on where you go, just a few miles to Puerto Paris. My father is Mescalero Apache he was born on the Mescalero Apache Reservation, which is about 90-some miles from Las Cruces. My mother was born in Mexico because she was born in Mexico before that part of Mexico became the United States. She was living in a place called Picacho, which is on the Rio Grande River. While she was there, her father and grandfather had been asked by the Spanish government to take care of giving out land. They called it Merced. Their job was to try and bring settlers. They would give land free to people who would come into that area around Picacho, but that was in Mexico at that time, so it was part of Spain. The Gaston Purchase took place in that part of the country. She became a citizen of the United States immediately. She was born in Mexico but really born in the United States at the same time. I was born there in 1941. I went to elementary school there, middle school, junior high, and high school. I went to college at New Mexico State University. I did a dual degree, a joint degree, one in science, and biological sciences. My interest was looking at range management, and I did a music degree as well. I played the violin. The violin helped me. I made my way through college. I got a scholarship to play the violin. I played in the university orchestra, played in the El Paso Symphony Orchestra. My best playing was done with mariachis in Chihuahua and northern Mexico. I used to go on Sundays or weekends with a group of mariachis. We would play mariachi music for the beer gardens, which was great fun. When I left there, I wasn't sure what I was going to do. Vietnam was full-blown. I went to see whether they were going to take me in in terms of Vietnam. They did not. I was given a poor eye because of my eyes. So, I joined the Peace Corps. I had a good friend in college who was in Peace Corps I. He went to Ghana. I decided that I was going to try to go to the Peace Corps. I applied. I wanted to go into public health. I wanted to go to the South Pacific because that was just opening. I was accepted to go to a country called Nigeria. I had never heard of Nigeria in my life. Las Cruces, if you don't hear about Chile, you don't hear much about Chile. But Nigeria, no. I had a world map going through it. I couldn't find Nigeria in the South Pacific. So, when I finally found it, I thought, well, do I want to go to Nigeria? Best decision of my life. My training was in Boston. I got to meet Chinua Achebe. I learned about things that I would never have expected to learn in my whole life. But Mr. Fuller was part of the training. I learned to speak a small amount of Obo, but primarily Pidgin because the part

of Nigeria that I was going to go to had multiple languages. And so, Pidgin was kind of the language. And so, I went to Nigeria. My village there was Otwa. Otwa has seven villages. I made up one big area called Otwa. Each village had a separate name and had a separate Owa who was a leader. So, I spent a year there teaching. (5:38) I taught science and biology. I also taught English because I spoke English. (5:44) It was wonderful. No electricity, no running water. It was like nothing I'd ever experienced, and the people were wonderful. So, I was there for a year. We had a war, the Biafran War. (6:00) And so our area was right on the border of the north, so the Hausa. And so, I was involved with a Catholic priest in taking young kids back through different areas of danger to their families back across what was then called Biafra, which was the eastern part of Nigeria. And then we were evacuated. We floated down to Niger. We'd never done that before. Took us to Ghana. From Ghana, went to Tanzania. Learned to speak Kiswahili. Taught English. Taught science. And Tanzania was different from Nigeria. But I was in Baidu, which was on Lake Victoria. And so I got to do a lot of science in the Serengeti. Met my wife. We got married in Tanga, which is on the Indian Ocean. At that time, Civil Rights in the United States were starting to get hot. We decided that it would be best for us to come back here. So, we came back. We bought a ticket with the money that we had. We arrived in San Francisco with about $74. That was about it. My wife's sister lived in Half Moon Bay, and so we stayed with her. And she had heard about a special program called Teacher Corps. And Teacher Corps was at San Francisco School. Why don't you go check it out? So, I called, and I said, I understand you have a program. I said I'm a returning Peace Corps volunteer. And they said, wow. Do you want to be a teacher? And I said, well, that's what I did, was teach. So, I said, okay, so why don't you come for an interview? I came for an interview at the church over here on Holloway and Juniper Serra. So, I did an interview. I was accepted to a program. The program was a program that allowed you to get an elementary life credential in California with a master's from education here, which I did. And so, we were here for about a year. And at the end of that time, or during that time, we were trying to decide what we were going to do. I thought I would teach, but I was not hired by San Francisco Unified, primarily because I was involved with the first strike against the district. They were teaching *Soul on Ice,* and so they fired the teacher and banned the book. And so at that time, I was teaching up on the hill, Potrero Hill. And so, we went on strike. And so, I was not hired. I thought maybe I'd stay here. But then ran into some problems in Salinas, taking some students down to visit classrooms there. And so, I was let go by San Francisco State University, College of Education as well. So, at the same time, a good friend of mine, John Collier, Jr., and John Connolly had told me about a program in Arizona on the Navajo Reservation. And so, I wrote and talked to some people. They said, come on out. So, we packed up and went to a place called Rough Rock, Arizona. So, I went there. I was going to teach middle school, but they asked me if I would work with them to establish a high school. So, I worked with them, and we established the first community-controlled high school on the reservation, Navajo Reservation. And I became the first principal. So, while we were there, part of my becoming the first principal was that I had asked that I be allowed to train my replacement, that it should be a community person. So, I did that. I trained that person, and that person was ready. We left. And we went across the state to New Mexico to a place called Nueske, which is on Jicarilla Apache River. And there I was the director of a program. They were trying to, at that time, before going there, they were averaging close to two student suicides a year, high school students. So part of my charge was to eliminate suicides. And so I went there, met with elders, I talked with different people, medicine men, and decided that what was missing was the culture, that in the schools they

had eliminated the culture. So, we reintroduced the culture. We reintroduced the language. We started programs for young girls to do basket weaving in the traditional way, and young boys to begin to do other kinds of work for older men, how to become medicine men. We had a medicine man training program. So, we were there for about four years or so, something like that. And then he came along. And he came along in March. I got a call from a good friend of mine here, Hal Johnson, who said that there was a program starting here for training bilingual teachers, and would I be interested in coming here and being the director of that program. So, I said that I would be interested in coming out for an interview. So, we came out before he was born. He was still...we came out. I came for an interview. And I was offered a job here as the first co-coordinator of the bilingual teacher training program. It was a joint program between education and ethnic studies. And we had Spanish. We had Chinese, Cantonese at that time. We had Japanese, and we had Tagalog.

Grace Yoo: What year was that?

Jacob Perea: That would have been 74 when I came out for the interview. No, 75, because you were born. Yeah, so 75. So, I came here in 1975 again. Left in 1970, came back in 75.

Grace Yoo: Okay, great. And what years were you in San Francisco?

Jacob Perea: From 75 till now.

Grace Yoo: Okay, but before that...

Jacob Perea: Before that, I was here from 68 to 70. The end of 68 to 70. And then that was it. So that's how I got here.

Baligh Ben Taleb: Yeah, so during your presence at SF State from 68 to 70, (14:05) what were some of the organizations that you became involved in?

Grace Yoo: And was that directly related to the strike?

Jacob Perea: (14:16) Okay. Well, there were none. No organizations I was involved with were directly related to the strike. However, there was an organization that I was involved with that was generally involved with the strike from the community perspective. And that was the Mission Coalition. Worked with them around different kinds of training programs. Set up an after-school program at the Garland Hotel.

Baligh Ben Taleb: Right, Garland.

Jacob Perea: Yeah, the Garland Hotel, which at that time was on 16th and Valencia. And it's where most of the Native people in San Francisco at that time lived. Because that's where they first came during relocation. So the government was relocating America Indians in 1968, around that period. And so, when they came into the Bay Area, they either went to Oakland or they came here. When they came here, they went to Mission Indian Center, which was down in that area. That was where the families lived. So, the biggest organization, or the main organization, was that. I was ancillary involved with the Black Panthers, but that was my wife. Because she was involved with the Panthers at that time as an office manager for their main offices here downtown in San Francisco. So, I would get involved there, but I was not heavily involved with that.

Baligh Ben Taleb: Just, again, on that period. During that period, were you familiar with the different speakers on campus?

Jacob Perea: Yes.

Baligh Ben Taleb: Were there any American Indian speakers?

Jacob Perea: No.

Grace Yoo: What role did you play during the strike? How did you get involved?

Jacob Perea: Well, my main involvement was with Richard Oaks. Actually, he lived in the Garland Hotel. And so, he and I started a Saturday school, and also a breakfast for the kids there. And so, working with him, became involved with another group of Native students who were involved with the anthropology program here at SF state. Which is really where the bulk of Native American students were housed. So, they were across the campus working with...

Baligh Ben Taleb: Luis Kemnitzer?

Jacob Perea: Yeah, Luis Kemnitzer, who was an anthropology professor. And then one of the professors that I worked with, was John Conway, and John Collier, Jr. And so there would be meetings, usually at Conway's house, and we would go to those meetings. And there would be discussions about things that were going to happen. The students that I spoke with, Richard primarily, was that there wasn't that much involvement necessarily wanted of meetings, because they were doing their own thing at the time.

Grace Yoo: Can you talk about Richard Oaks more?

Jacob Perea: Well, he was a very interesting person in my memory. Now this is a long time ago. I know that he was totally committed. To Indians, particularly children. He believed the children had to be safe and educated. That without education, they would continue to be moved around the way the government wanted to move them around. And so, he saw education as being primary to what needed to happen. This is one of the reasons, I think, that we became involved. It's like we both knew that education was important.

Baligh Ben Taleb: (18:07) During your presence at S.F State, how did you see the changes over the years in the college?

Jacob Perea: Well, the battle that we went through, and I have to say that Jim, Hirabayashi, Jim understood that the administration was going to get its way, no matter what. But they didn't have to get all their way. And so, there were places in what they wanted that he felt that ethnic studies could fill. But ethnic studies had to be a particular way for that to happen. And he tried really hard meeting with us. We would meet, we would talk. How are we going to become ethnic studies as a part of the institution without becoming the institution? Because that was the main discussion that was taking place. How do you not become internally colonized, so to speak? Because if you're part of the institution, and you're trying to fight the institution to not be part of the institution, what do you give up being part of the institution? What are you going to hold on not to be part of the institution? So, those were always, for me anyway, in the discussions we had, those were the discussions and tensions that I think, a lot of the tension that was felt within the college itself. Jim, I

think, really worked with that the best. He was the person who took us from a study to a college. And once we became a college, the whole question of whether there would be tenure or not ended. At that point, there was going to be tenure. There was going to be a tenure track. You were going to have FTEs; you were going to have FTEs. You were going to have to fall into that mold.

Grace Yoo: What year was that?

Jacob Perea: That would have been 1979, 1980.

Grace Yoo: And Jim was Dean until 1979?

Jacob Perea: Yeah, until he left.

Grace Yoo: And then Phil came...

Jacob Perea: Phil came. Let me be honest, I love Phil. Still today. I remember just tons and tons of things. He would not allow anything to go wrong. He attacked whoever the president was, whenever he felt the president or whomever needed to be attacked, he would attack. And he did it on the basis that this place is the only place that is what it is, and we're going to remain who it is we are regardless of what you try to do to us. And so, he was just in people's faces all the time. And so, when you were with him, when you went to a meeting, you expected that there was going to be a row. And not always, but quite a bit of the time, he was never ever going to let things happen. When Corrigan was hired, Bob Corrigan, he went to Bob Corrigan (President 1988-2012) and told him, you might have come from all these places, you're this liberal Baptist, but you don't know anything about us out there. And you sure don't know about black people here. So don't you come out here and tell us who we are. Right off the bat, Corrigan looked at everybody and said, "What did I do? And Phil said, "you took the job." We're part of you now, not you, otherwise. We are part of you. You've got to be then listening to us, doing what we are saying you need to do. You've got to protect us. And in the end, Corrigan protected us.

Grace Yoo: What contributions do you think Phil made?

Jacob Perea: Well, I think probably the first contribution, the most important contribution, was that we became a stable college. We weren't necessarily accepted, right? But we were there when GE came out in 1980. It was Phil. We were at HHS at that time. We had meetings talking about how we were going to approach, politically, GE. Because we understood, just like the rest of the institution understood, that GE was going to be our lifeline. But we didn't want it to become our lifeline and at the same time, somehow dilute who it is we are. And so, it had to be, we had to have this give and take. So, there were certain things where the institution or the university said, well, you can't teach English. I mean, nobody in ethnic studies can speak English, but to teach English, what is this? Where at the same time, anthropologist was saying, well, we can teach about ancient Mesopotamia and all these kinds of things. And so, Phil worked with that. He did the work that needed to be done with the president at that time. He did the work that needed to be done with the other deans. So, he was really kind of, he became, I don't want to call him a catalyst, because we didn't necessarily mix, but he was like a catalyst, and he went in like this. And so here we are. You may not like us. You may not even want to be in the same room with us, but we are here. You're going to accept us, no matter what. And so, we were. We were there. If you were a chair in the department, you needed to be there. You needed to go out. You needed to be seen because you

represented the college. So that was what he did. He made sure that the college became a college in terms of people seeing it and respecting it. Plus, he wasn't afraid. He didn't, he would say, what are they going to do to me? So, I would say, Phil, Phil was instrumental. Jim, Jim was the catalyst. Jim was the person who took us when we were like this. And out of that came the beginning. Phil came in, and then we moved on.