

Las Marchas de Del Rio
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In the summer of 1968, Aurelio Manuel Montemayor was named supervisor trainer of the brand-new VISTA Minority Mobilization Project.¹ VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) had been the domestic peace Corps which had created such interest in middle class white students to go and help other countries.² VISTA was basically recruiting white middle class college students and recent graduates to go work in poor neighborhoods around the country. In his last teaching year at San Felipe H.S. in the now-defunct San Felipe ISD from September of 1967 to May of 1968, Aurelio had made connections with several VISTAs working in the San Felipe barrios. Aurelio even brought some of them into his classroom to work with his students on collages and art projects which Aurelio was introducing into his Junior English classes.³

That year Aurelio had also worked on the campaign to elect the first Mexican American mayor of Del Rio, Dr. Alfredo 'Felo' Gutierrez. Unbeknownst to him, Felo was a conservative Republican. Aurelio was very naïve about politics at the time although the cultural movement was already motivating him to support Chicano candidates of any ilk. Dr. Gutierrez recommended him for the VMMP supervisor position as had the local VISTAs. Mayor Gutierrez' brother, Antonio Gutierrez, assistant superintendent of the San Felipe ISD had recruited Aurelio in 1964 to come teach in Del Rio. None of them or the other school officials, nor did Aurelio, for that matter, expect him to become the 'radical' that eventually had him ostracized by the power structures in Del Rio.⁴

The Vista Minority Mobilization project, a small pilot effort, recruited locals to be both the VISTA volunteers and the supervisors and trainers, was situated in five communities: the lower Rio Grande Valley, Laredo, San Antonio, El Paso and Del Rio. The program was part of the Office of Economic Opportunity part President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. The program officer in Austin was Gonzalo Barrientos who eventually would be elected as a senator in the Texas legislature.

The summer of 1968 at the initial training in San Antonio, under the leadership Gil Murillo, the new supervisors/trainers met the key organizers of the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO): Jose Angel Gutierrez, Nacho Perez and Mario Compean, who was also the VMMP supervisor/trainer in San Antonio.⁵ Among other consultants Gil brought in was Genaro Garcia, who became a strong friend and partner with Aurelio and co-developed the Curso de la Raza.⁶

Some of the twenty VISTA volunteers under Aurelio were his ex-students. They learned about the MAYO organization and Efrain Barrera and Aurelio decided to start a group in Del Rio as soon as we returned.

Aurelio began to train and encourage the VISTAs to work in the barrios and identify needs and develop leadership. Instead of having an office in the downtown area where the Community Action Agency, the local sponsoring organization, was located we rented an empty small grocery store and set up shop. The VISTA included some older folk as well as the younger college-age volunteers. The MAYO group was soon organized, mostly from Aurelio's ex-students and soon connected to the state organization.

A newsletter, *La Justicia Mayorista*, written by Aurelio and the MAYOS, began to appear in the San Felipe barrios.⁷ Aurelio had correspondence with state leaders including Jose Angel Gutierrez, and took representatives of the San Felipe local unit to state conferences and meetings. Aurelio was a sponsor but not a member because it was for high school and college age youth. At the next statewide election in San Antonio, Aurelio took several representatives as voting members. That year there was a tie between Carlos Guerra (RIP) and Mario Compean and Aurelio counseled the reps to vote for Mario.

As the MAYOs became more public the local authorities increased their concern. Aurelio was approached about the issues and counseled to cease but ignored warnings. In the early months of 1969, the Community Action Agency board took action and called a meeting to investigate the doings of the Vista Minority Mobilization Project, the supervisor/trainer and the relationship to the 'radical group' MAYO.

Aurelio faced a committee (kangaroo Court) at a public meeting and was castigated for introducing radical politics into the community. The committee voted to shut down the program and asked that it no longer operate in Del Rio. They were shown proof of correspondence between Aurelio and Jose Angel and others testified that we had meetings at the 'tiendita' and that some people were afraid of the MAYOs.

When the program was stopped, a protest march was planned. A legal march could not be held without a city permit which they knew there would be no chance of getting. The only kind of procession allowed without a permit was a funeral. Rusty Sanchez, VISTA with MMP and Aurelio's ex-student, had an old hearse as his means of transportation, and it was determined to have a burial for a dead rabbit named Justicia.⁸ A few supporters from around the state came into town for the 'funeral procession' and it was stopped just as it was starting. A large group was arrested. Mike Gonzalez, a local lawyer, supporter and G I Forum officer, brought in another lawyer friend, Warren Burnett, to help with the case. It was thrown out and everyone quickly released because the city ordinance on marches had not been properly promulgated and was null and void.

La Marcha: Word spread statewide about these events and another protest was called for: a much larger and longer march on Palm Sunday that March.⁹ By then the state leaders of LULAC, American GI Forum and other allies were alerted and called for mass protest. Over 3,000 people joined the *Marcha de Del Rio*. The march began with a general assembly at the Convention Center in the predominantly white part of town, paused at the county courthouse to post a declaration on the doors, and continued all the way to a park where three priests (including Fr.

Roberto Flores, later co-developer of El Curso de la Raza) co-celebrated Mass. Even though there were armed men inside the courthouse there was no violence.¹⁰ MAYO led aggressively and it was clear that the older groups were now in the background. With the national press in attendance, MAYO and Del Rio got state and nationwide notice.^{11, 12}

The state MAYO leadership were somewhat distressed because these events happened too soon. The Del Rio group with the newest and greenest supervisor had now leapt into prominence. Aurelio was ostracized by the families and local leaders in San Felipe who had previously made him a popular teacher and now considered me a 'communist' 'rabble-rouser' and poisoner of young people.

The ex-VISTAs and MAYOs started a group: *BASTA Barrios Associated in Service to America*.¹³ The hope was that through donations they could continue organizing. The VISTAs lost their jobs. That winter Aurelio attended the first statewide MAYO conference at La Lomita, just south of Mission Texas and there decided to move to the valley to start an independent Chicano college. But that's another story.

Post-Marcha MALDEF support: A legal case to take the governor to court for stopping our program was taken on by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF).¹⁴ The Del Rio VISTA legal cause did not succeed.

Wrap-up of the Marcha de Del Rio story:

The decision to stop the VISTA Minority Mobilization Program in Del Rio and the subsequent large protest march on March 30, 1969, was driven by a combination of local and national factors. While the program itself may have appeared small, it had significant implications for the Chicano Movement and the Mexican American community. Some reasons behind these events:

- **Political Resistance:** The VISTA program had evolved into a platform for community empowerment and activism, which challenged the existing power structures in Del Rio and local authorities and those who benefited from the status quo felt threatened.
- **Chicano Movement Empowerment:** The VISTA program was instrumental in fostering the Chicano Movement, which sought to empower Mexican Americans and address civil rights issues. This was a direct challenge to traditional leadership structures, and it contributed to the program's growing significance.
- **Protest as a Response:** The decision to shut down the VISTA program was perceived as an attempt to silence community activism and empowerment. In response to this perceived injustice, activists and community members organized protest marches to defend their right to community involvement.
- **Solidarity and National Attention:** The protest marches in Del Rio garnered not only local but also national attention. The involvement of prominent Chicano leaders and organizations like MAYO attracted support and solidarity from across the country, making the issue far more significant than just the closure of a local program.
- **Larger Movement:** The marches in Del Rio were part of the broader Chicano Movement, which was gaining momentum across the Southwest. The program's closure symbolized a broader struggle for civil rights, social justice, and community empowerment. Mexican American communities saw this as an attack on their broader movement.

- Changing Dynamics: The VISTA program shifted the dynamic in Del Rio, emphasizing community empowerment and grassroots organizing rather than charity-based approaches. This change was not well-received by those who preferred the traditional approach to addressing poverty.

Lesson objectives for teaching about the Marcha de Del Rio:

- Historical Context Social Studies TEKS 6.1A: Analyze why historical events have occurred in specific times and places.
- Civil Rights and Social Justice: Social Studies TEKS 8.22A: Evaluate the effectiveness of various methods used by civil rights and other social movements to achieve their goals.
- Activism and Grassroots Movements: Social Studies TEKS 8.21B: Analyze the role of grassroots organizations and movements in the history of the United States.
- Primary Source Analysis: Social Studies TEKS 6.22A: Analyze information by sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing, contrasting, finding the main idea, summarizing, making generalizations and predictions, and drawing inferences and conclusions.
- Government and Politics: Social Studies TEKS 8.17A: Identify and analyze methods of expanding the right to participate in the democratic process, including registering to vote.
- Comparative Analysis: Social Studies TEKS 8.22C: Compare the impact of advocacy, past and present, to promote the civil rights of various groups.
- Critical Thinking and Evaluation Social Studies TEKS 8.21C: Evaluate the effectiveness of the Bill of Rights in protecting individual rights.
- Media and Communication: Social Studies TEKS 8.22D: Analyze the significance and effects of various forms of media used to advocate and support civil rights and social justice.
- Contemporary Relevance: Social Studies TEKS 8.17B: Analyze efforts by global organizations to undermine U.S. sovereignty and evaluate the impact of historical and contemporary efforts on national identity and culture.

Possible warm-up questions on the *Marcha de Del Rio*, March 30, 1969:

- What was the VISTA program, and who were its initial recruits?
- How did Aurelio Montemayor's interactions with VISTA volunteers influence his teaching approach at San Felipe H.S.?
- What was the VISTA Minority Mobilization Project?
- What motivated Aurelio to support Chicano candidates in politics, and how did it lead to his involvement in the VISTA Minority Mobilization Project?
- Can you explain the goals and objectives of the VISTA Minority Mobilization Project?
- What was the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO)?
- Who were some of the key organizers of the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), and what role did they play in the story?
- What was the significance of the "Curso de la Raza," and who co-developed it with Aurelio Montemayor?
- How did the MAYO group in Del Rio become organized and connected to the state organization?
- Describe the symbolic "funeral procession" with the dead rabbit named Justicia. Why was this done?
- What events led to the *Marcha de Del Rio*, and what were its main objectives?
- Explain the role of the state leaders of LULAC, American GI Forum, and other allies in the *Marcha de Del Rio*.
- How did the national press coverage impact the perception of MAYO and Del Rio on a broader scale?
- What were the consequences of the *Marcha de Del Rio* for Aurelio Montemayor and the local community?
- What was the purpose and goal of the "BASTA Barrios Associated in Service to America" group formed by ex-VISTAs and MAYOs?
- What was the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund?
- How did MALDEF get involved in supporting a legal case related to the VISTA program in Del Rio, and what was the outcome?

Here are some **key vocabulary terms and phrases** to highlight for high school students in a class on the *Marcha de Del Rio*, March 30, 1969:

- ✓ VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America): VISTA was a domestic volunteer program created as a part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. It recruited volunteers, often college students, to work in poor neighborhoods in the United States.
- ✓ Chicano Candidates: This term refers to Mexican American political candidates who represented the Chicano civil rights movement.
- ✓ Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO): MAYO was a prominent organization involved in the Chicano civil rights movement, and it played a significant role in the events surrounding the *Marcha de Del Rio*.
- ✓ War on Poverty: This was a set of policies and programs introduced by President Lyndon Johnson to address poverty and inequality in the United States.

- ✓ Community Action Agency: A community-based organization that works to address social and economic issues within specific local communities.
- ✓ Curso de la Raza: A reference to a course related to Chicano culture and identity.
- ✓ La Justicia Mayorista: This was a newsletter that played a role in spreading information and organizing efforts related to the Chicano civil rights movement.
- ✓ Protest March: Refers to a public demonstration where people gather to express their grievances or advocate for social or political change.
- ✓ Palm Sunday: A Christian religious holiday observed on the Sunday before Easter.
- ✓ Mass: A religious service, especially in the context of the Catholic Church.
- ✓ LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens): A civil rights organization that advocates for the rights and interests of Hispanic Americans.
- ✓ American GI Forum: A veterans organization that focuses on civil rights issues and advocates for Hispanic veterans and their families.
- ✓ BASTA (Barrios Associated in Service to America): A group formed by ex-VISTAs and MAYOs with the aim of continuing their community organizing efforts.
- ✓ MALDEF (Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund): A legal organization that works to protect the civil rights of Mexican Americans and other Latinos through litigation and advocacy.
- ✓ Ostracized: To be excluded or shunned by a group or community.
- ✓ Communist: A political ideology associated with the belief in a classless society and the ownership of all property and resources by the community as a whole.
- ✓ Rabble-rouser: A term used to describe someone who stirs up or incites a crowd or group of people to engage in disruptive or unruly behavior.
- ✓ Civil Rights Movement: A social and political movement in the United States that aimed to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans and other minority groups.
- ✓ Chicano College: A reference to the idea of creating an educational institution that focuses on Chicano culture and education.
- ✓ Governor: The head of a state government in the United States.

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