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March to the District: The 1992 Student Walkout at Montebello High School

Jonathan Pacheco Bell · Wednesday, August 3rd, 2016

Don't tell me protest doesn't work. Don't tell me resistance is useless. Don't give me that apathy. I know protest works. I've done it. I can testify to the power of free speech against government wrongdoing.

While a sophomore at Montebello High School in 1992, I was among over one thousand students who [walked out](#) to protest the Montebello Unified School District's plan to defund our award-winning industrial arts program. The district-wide curriculum included specialty tracks in architecture, drafting, and wood shop – engaging coursework that kept marginal students like myself interested in school. The proposed \$9 million in cuts was the latest in a series of austerity measures the district took in the tumultuous 1991-92 school year to ward off insolvency. Years of deficit spending left the district in the bloodiest of red. Teacher layoffs, forced retirements, and \$27 million in cuts in 1991 apparently weren't enough. Any course that seemed gratuitous was earmarked for termination. Put simply, the school district fucked up and we were paying for it.

Furious students didn't sit back and wait for help. No! We rose. We spoke out. We walked off campus and marched *unidos* to district headquarters to tell 'em wassup.

Friday, March 27, 1992. Tensions lingered on campus in the days leading up to the walkout. The Associated Student Body had talked about a demonstration, but few, including me, believed it'd happen. "That's some [Sal Castro](#) action our *tios* did in the 60s . . .".

I had Architecture for 2nd period. The class was taught by a retired USMC Drill Sergeant, Mr. Anthony Perez. He'd become a father figure to me (and other kids from single mother households) from whom I learned the word "meticulous." As in: "Pacheco, your blueprints better be *meticulous*." Walkout chatter consumed his class. Mr. Perez saw this decades ago. He ordered us to drop the T-squares and listen up.

"I served in Vietnam and returned home to my country in protest," he said. "I didn't agree with them, but I knew it was their right. Like you, I don't wanna see our class defunded. So if you guys think your rights are being violated, do what you think is right."

At morning recess, students in Senior Park were restless. Everyone was eyeing each other to see if somebody else would lead. I hung back with my homeboys, watching, waiting. For 15 tense minutes there was nothing.

But as the bell rang commanding us back to class it happened – a mob of students began a mad dash toward the football field. Everyone was in: jocks, taggers, cholas, grunge kids, *paisas*, acting as one. Campus security – "narcs", as we called them – stood by paralyzed at the sight of us in revolt.

I shouted, "This is it!", as we joined the stampede running to the north end of the field. The usually

locked gate was open: no fence jumping required. As I walked out onto Madison Avenue at 10:10 a.m., I saw the awe-inspiring sight of classmates, already hundreds strong in the street, marching east. District HQ was 1 mile away.

Amidst the crowd, I noticed a short, heavy-set, middle-aged white lady shouting in the street. She sported a mullet, mom jeans and a faded red-and-white Hawaiian shirt. She looked out of place, an anomaly in the mass of young, brown faces.

My first thought was, “She’s criticizing us!”

Inching closer, I heard her words: “LET’S GO! DON’T LET THEM TAKE OUR PROGRAMS AWAY!” Her hands flailed about as if she were boxing an invisible school board member. “WE’RE GOING TO THE DISTRICT TO SHOW ‘EM WE MEAN IT!” This soccer mom was an ally in our fight.

Most of us probably didn’t realize this was an exercise in our First Amendment rights. It was probably the first time most of us realized we had a voice.

Protesters expressed their dissent in personal ways. One group of girls marched crying, arms interlocked for strength. Their tears symbolized our collective emotion and spoke louder than the inaudible screams that permeated the air. Other students raised clenched fists and denounced with profanities the names of school board members. The Board of Education roster is otherwise unknown to 10th graders, but the district’s plan had made board members household names. Two blocks down at Vail Avenue, my homie Mark “Mxyzptlk” Jimenez started freestyling. His rhymes were impromptu, angry and powerful, like the march itself. His tone, defiant . . .

Fuck the district!

Fuck your rules!

Fuck your system!

Fuck you fools!

We weren’t alone. Madison Avenue residents stood on their front porches cheering. I saw arms pumping in the air in solidarity. *Abuelitas* holding grandchildren, retirees, parents, even the mailman had our back. This was the same route I walked to and from school everyday. Same people and houses I’d never noticed. Our march animated the street. The community’s solidarity legitimized our voices. And in the moment, their encouragement propelled us passed Maple Avenue en route to the district.

As we approached the intersection of Madison and Spruce, I saw what I knew was inevitable: the Montebello Police. Five black-and-whites formed a barricade on the north side of Montebello Boulevard, parallel to our path, blocking traffic heading south. I assumed another barricade loomed around the corner forming an unsympathetic corral, relegating our protest to blocks from the district.

Someone screamed, “Don’t stop!”

But turning right on Montebello Boulevard, I saw no squad cars, no skirmish line, no obstructions. Instead, the police had stopped traffic to give us safe passage south on Montebello and across Whittier Boulevard to the school district. We waved and thanked the police for protecting our rights.

By now I’d made it to the front. The district headquarters building was in sight. We crossed Whittier Boulevard, normally a bustling thoroughfare that was at a standstill behind police barricades. Stopped cars honked in solidarity. I suppressed my tears.

The march culminated at 123 S. Montebello Boulevard at the school district’s front steps. I had a prime position with a view into the enemy’s lobby. It was barren; no staff, no cross-hall traffic.

Students from Bell Gardens and Schurr Highs soon arrived. We suspended rivalries. Now, over one thousand enraged students were outside the school district demanding to address the Board of Education.

Classmates ascended the stairs to deliver speeches, none over 3 minutes, but all as powerful as MLK and Cesar. The first speaker, Guillermo, bellowed: “THEY’RE AFRAID OF US BECAUSE WE’RE RIGHT! THAT’S WHY THEY’RE NOT COMING OUT!”

We roared in agreement.

A girl clutching an “MHS Oilers”-emblazoned bullhorn got up and demanded to know why students had to pay for the district’s mistakes. “SOME ASSHOLE IN ACCOUNTING SCREWS UP AND WE HAVE TO SUFFER? THAT’S UNJUST!”

We’d been agitating and blocking traffic out there for 15 minutes and still no one came out. The prolonged non-response made district officials look all the more cowardly. Our collective voice frightened them. But I think even more disconcerting was that they knew we were right.

It wasn’t long before the media arrived. I saw TV reporters scurrying to interview protesters. Initially they flocked to students on the periphery, some of whom I recognized as slackers who’d just tagged along. None were industrial arts students. Did they even understand why it came to this? I assumed they were portraying us poorly.

Reporters eventually worked their way into the heart of our demonstration to interview speakers. I was relieved to see KNBC and Fox 11 getting statements from student leaders who I felt gave us credibility. They’d convey our passionate dissent to all of Los Angeles.

Perhaps on cue, a district official emerged to address us. He was a white man in his late 40s, possibly middle management, but definitely not a school board member. His alabaster dress shirt was unbuttoned at the top allowing his neck to breath. A paisley tie hung loosely around his neck, reminiscent of an at-ready hangman’s noose. I thought his disheveled, defeated appearance was apropos. Hell yeh we’d shaken them.

Students quieted as he readied to read a prepared statement. The hush presented an opportunity for someone behind me to yell, “Fuck you, man, we’ll beat your ass!”

Ignoring insults, he declared: “The Montebello Unified School District decided late last night not to cut back funding for industrial arts in the district’s high schools. Therefore, this demonstration is unnecessary. For your safety, we implore you to go back to campus.”

The good news came with a sting. Who was this *pendejo* to say our collective voice was “unnecessary”?

That the Board of Education purportedly voted hours before to drop their \$9 million in cuts reeked of face-saving bullshit. Announcing that decision publicly would’ve spared them the embarrassment and danger of a thousand kids pounding at their door. Instead they sent a beleaguered “suit” to try to dismiss our protest with 3 uninspired sentences.

I’ll never know if that declaration was even partially true. It doesn’t matter though. I know our march pushed them. They knew we’d organized. They knew we were coming. We made the school district realize we wouldn’t let them defund our education without a fight. And you know what? They knew we were right.

Our march to the district would occur just weeks before the [1992 Los Angeles Uprising](#) and that haunting Spring of unrest. Ours was one of many in the lineage of Latino walkouts [past](#) and [future](#). We didn’t know it then, but we’d entered L.A. Eastside history.

Armed with words and passion and numbers, we went heads up with that fucking school district. And we won.

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