

Narrator name: Marko Gutierrez
Interviewer: Charlene Miciano
Date: May 17th, 2021
Location: San Diego, CA
Collection: Race and Oral History Course, Spring 2021
Length of interview: 00:36:43

Charlene Miciano: Hello everyone, my name is Charlene Miciano today is May 17th, 2021 and I'm here interviewing Marko Gutierrez of San Ysidro High School through Zoom for the UCSD San Diego— for the UCSD Race and Oral History Project. Do you agree to grant the university permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

Marko Gutierrez: Yes.

Charlene Miciano: Okay. Great, so let's get started with our interview. Hi Marko, thank you so much for coming out today and speaking with me, could you tell me a little bit more about yourself and your background?

Marko Gutierrez: Yes, I'm an educator, I'm a teacher at San Ysidro High School. I've been here for about 14 years. And I am also the AVID coordinator, and AVID is a program that helps first generation students or minority students or underrepresented students attend a college or university. We do this by providing support, mentoring, both academic support, social support and helping students, especially those whose parents might not have experience navigating the higher education system, and so we provide tutoring, we help them formulate a four year plan, we help them with college applications, financial aid applications, scholarships. And we give them the academic support they need to be successful, and also try to instill the academic skills and habits that will help them succeed in college as well. Besides that I also teach AP English language at the high school as well.

Charlene Miciano: I see, I see so tell me a bit of what a— what an average day in an AVID classroom is like, so what kinds of things would you be doing in the classroom, what activities?

Marko Gutierrez: Alright so like an average day... so it's a little bit different, the pandemic versus in person. Usually in person, we would have one hour of college tutors, that would come from the universities to help the students prepare for quizzes, tests that they have in classes, questions about homework, or to write papers and they get that hour of academic support in which they're helping each other out, the tutors and students help each other out. And then the other hour would consist of curriculum. This could be showing them, guiding them through— senior year, I teach the seniors so, it would be guiding them through writing their personal insight questions, guiding them through the college applications. Going section by section, revising, helping them with their activity section, writing their EOP answers to the questions on the applications. We would watch videos on tips for how to do all this, as well. After college application season's over we focus a lot on scholarships, so exposing students to scholarships helping them formulate— getting the documents that they need like letters of recommendation, how to request a letter of recommendation, filling out like— sheets where they can give to teachers or other community members for writing the letter of recommendation to highlight information about themselves to put on the letters. Exposing them to different organizations that

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have scholarships, brainstorming responses for the scholarships. So in the younger grades it varies, a lot of it is more preparing for the application process, becoming good candidates, you know, developing leadership skills and things like that, but for senior AVID that's what we focus on.

Charlene Miciano: Okay, see I see. So how have you been doing this process over the pandemic, so have you had any— have you had any challenges in doing this kind of— these same activities over Zoom?

Marko Gutierrez: Well, in some ways it's been both a blessing, but also a challenge. In one sense, Zoom has helped in the sense that, I can share my screen and each student can easily see what is going on and follow along with that. And in addition I can do breakout rooms, where I can meet with individual students on a one on one basis in a much more organized and orderly fashion than in a physical classroom. In a physical classroom, the problem was always that everyone is unique and has a different story or background. And so in the classroom I can't— it was hard to— it was hard to— it felt like I was being tugged between 30 different students in one hour or two hours, and it was a challenge because everybody had different questions, and it was hard to get to every single student physically. Through Zoom, it's a little bit more manageable, because I can take questions in the chat, I can meet in breakout rooms, if someone has a personal question that they want to ask, they can ask them in a breakout room. In a classroom they may be too shy to ask a very personal question for fear of judgment. But at the same time, the challenge has been that I don't see the students as often on— through virtually than I would in person, so our time is very limited virtually. That has been the problem. But it has brought some good things, but just the challenge, I guess the challenge of time, has been the biggest issue yeah. And also you know in person, you can kind of see what they're doing and follow along with them and virtually you kind of have to hope that they're all listening and following along.

Charlene Miciano: Definitely definitely. How do you think the students, from what you've seen have been impacted by online learning, do you think they're more engaged less engaged, how would you describe how their— how their behavior is in the classroom?

Marko Gutierrez: I think that the students that have succeeded, are the ones who are able to be a little bit more autonomous and independent in terms of their education, and are able to kind of take ownership of their learning right. Students who are not self sufficient yet, or lack maybe time management skills, I think, have been hurt the most, whereas at home it's easy to get distracted. A lot of students, sometimes telling me that well— I had one student tell me like if they saw like a pile of dishes that that would distract them. They would do that, instead of doing their class work right. And I also think students who have been impacted are the ones who don't have a quiet working environment at home. You know I teach at a low income school. The

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majority of students are free and reduced lunch and a lot of them might live in a small space, one or two bedroom apartment, sharing space with five or six other people. It becomes hard to focus and concentrate or even listen to your classes that way, and I think, besides that one of the other challenges has been... a lot of students have told me that during this quarantine pandemic they've lacked motivation. Without coming to school, every day, they basically had to find ways to motivate themselves and sometimes they lose that motivation, they're not interacting with peers as much, you know it's that— they lost that social connection and for many of them that was key to kind of keep them going keep them motivated or just distract themselves from problems, and so I think that's a big way that they've been impacted.

Charlene Miciano: I see, I see, are there any plans from the school district or San Ysidro to move back into in person learning or what developments have been made so far?

Marko Gutierrez: So just recently at the beginning of May, all teachers reported back. And at the beginning of April actually some teachers, those who volunteered came back to the classroom and some students were invited back. The students who they identified as being like the ones who probably need more support. And in May more students were invited back as more teachers came back. I have— so right now some students are in the classroom. Those who chose to remain home remain home, but I have a feeling that, and when we start next school year, the way things look now I think there's a good chance that it will be back in person fully.

Charlene Miciano: That's really good, that's really good, yeah. Do you know anything about what's been happening at the school district? I know that Sweetwater Union tends to end up in the news for different things that happen in the district. Do you happen to know anything about what's going on there?

Marko Gutierrez: I just know that there was, there is a new superintendent so they were an interim and they were just recently, a few weeks ago, hired to remain the superintendent. There was— yeah there were some issues with budgets and funding and money, and the decision was made by the school board to relieve the superintendent before of their post due to that, along with some other key personnel that— there was a lack of oversight, I think and so our district was in the red, we were not...we didn't have enough money to cover all the expenses. There were a lot of budget cuts to schools, classrooms, a lot of teachers were laid off. And so now there's been a new superintendent just hired so we'll see how that goes.

Charlene Miciano: I see I see. Have you seen any of the programs specifically AVID or any other programs that have been affected, maybe due to that? I'm not sure if that exactly would.

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Marko Gutierrez: Well it's....(sighs) it's....yes, in the sense that... well, either due to that or due to the pandemic. There were no tutors hired for this school year. And these tutors are very important to the AVID program because not only do they provide academic support, but the tutors serve as role models for students. And our students can ask them questions about you know, "So what is college like?" or "What's your college experience like?" or you know "How do tests work or homework work?" what are— you know, "How did your classes work or your schedule?". So they're an avenue for students to get direct insight into the college experience from someone closer to their age group than a teacher. And they also, as I said, provide valuable academic support and tutoring to the students so that's been a major blow to our program this year. And we hope to get them back for next school year, for back in person. You know, like I said. You know, part of it was a pandemic, but you know part of it could have been budget. As far as other things, yeah there were cuts in terms of sending teachers to training, or like we couldn't send as many anymore, because of budget cuts. And that— well that has a direct effect on students because, the less professional development, teachers receive, then they can't take those strategies or what they learned into the classroom which will benefit students.

Charlene Miciano: Right right, I see I see. Okay, so I'll be taking it back from San Ysidro High. I want you to talk a little bit more about yourself, so could you tell me more about your own background and how you ended up becoming a teacher?

Marko Gutierrez: Sure, yes. I graduated from Sweetwater High school and then from there I attended San Diego State. So when I first attended San Diego State I was actually majoring to become a physical therapist. However, (laughs) I took my first biology class in college and I realized, it was a lot different than high school. And so, I was like uhhh, I don't think I can do this for you know, four years. So I wasn't sure what I wanted to do after that. I thought back and through my education and my upbringing and I said well you know, maybe I could be a teacher, but I wasn't sure what kind of teacher or where or what and I tried liberal studies to be an elementary teacher first. And then I took a couple of math classes for elementary teachers and I realized, man, this is hard like how to explain these math concepts to kids that like you take for granted now that you're an adult you know how to do this, but trying to explain it to kids is tough. So, then, I was like back to square one again, okay, what am I going to do. And then I took a creative writing class. And I took a literature class and I remember the professor talking about how they couldn't believe they get paid to talk about books and I was like man that's great. And you know, he would hop on the tables and he would give these amazing lectures and I thought yeah, you know I could see myself doing this. And so I majored in English and I decided to get a teaching credential because that stuck with me, what that professor said and I also knew— I knew that I had a passion for books and writing and I also wanted to inspire others to see the value in that as well. And so I became an English teacher and then through teaching— while I was in college, I was also an AVID tutor at my local— at the high school I graduated from, and

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so, when I became a teacher, I got involved with the AVID program and became an AVID teacher as well.

Charlene Miciano: That's really cool, it comes full circle. (laughs)

Marko Gutierrez: Yeah it did (laughs) it really did.

Charlene Miciano: Wow that's really good. Can you tell me about your time at Sweetwater High? What was it like going to high school then?

Marko Gutierrez: Yeah it had undergone a big shift, with the principal that was there and so at the time that I attended there, you know, before I got there, it had the reputation of having like— there were like gangs and stuff but the principal, when I got there, it was a really great campus. The teachers really care, the principal made sure that the teachers were on top of the students and I really had a great experience with teachers that pushed me, they challenged me... they were always constantly...asking their students to do more, and believe in themselves and, and so I really had a great experience that at the high school there. And also being that the counselors there also motivated me, also making sure that I apply to college as well.

Charlene Miciano: I see, I see. So do you think having the counselors really... tell you to go to college did that like really influence you, or were you on the fence about going to college? Do you think if they hadn't motivated you, do you think you would have gone or not, or would you still have gone to college.

Marko Gutierrez: I still would have gone, but I guess, making sure that I took the right classes, I think, is what really helped because I— based on my background, growing up, since I was like five or six years old, I go to work with my dad, he was in landscaping. And that really shaped my future because he would always tell me that he didn't want me to work the way he works, and he wanted me to use my brain instead of my hands. And so seeing like the labor that he would do really made me want to go to college because it's something that my parents pushed me to do. So I think I would have gone anyways but, in terms of like, as a student I just I (laughs) kind of just took the classes that kind of told me to take right? Now, but with the counselors' help, you know, they made it a lot easier in terms of planning the steps I needed to take and the plan that I needed to formulate in order to make sure I was taking the right courses.

Charlene Miciano: I see I see, so how about your family, can you tell me a little bit more of your dad and your family and maybe things that you remember from your childhood or from high school or anything that you remember?

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Marko Gutierrez: Yes, my family, my parents were both immigrants, they both grew up in Mexico and different parts of Mexico. My grandfather was a bracero during World War II when

the US sent troops overseas to fight. They needed people to take over the jobs here in the US and my grandfather crossed and he was selected, and he had to work in the fields, picking strawberries or picking cotton, grapes, or whatever. He would just move from place to place along in California to work in the fields. And then he was able to successfully immigrate his wife, my grandmother, and their kids. So half of my mom's family, her siblings, were born in Mexico, but then, by the time he was here and was able to bring them, the other half were born here. So, in total, my mom comes from a family of eight siblings so it's a big family. They're very close, we used to go have Sunday dinner at my grandma's every Sunday growing up as a kid. My dad came from a place... Ciudad Juarez is what it's called but it's on the bottom of Texas. And he came in and one thing that always stuck with me was the story my dad told me that when they came to the US at first, that there were signs in Texas still, that said "No dogs or Mexicans allowed" and so that... that always stuck with me I was like, wow. So they left Texas, and they came to California, they came to Los Angeles. And my— his mom didn't like—they don't like the lifestyle here. She wanted to go back to Mexico, but they didn't go all the way back to where they were from. They ended up going to right here across the border here in San Ysidro to Tijuana, Mexico. And that's where he met my mom and they got married. And then— so growing up every, Saturday and every summer vacation was spent with my dad working, and so I think that's where I got my work ethic from. I have one sibling, a brother. He's also a teacher, he teaches history. And so. You know, one of the things that I can say is that I know that the US has afforded a lot of opportunities to our family and my parents' families, because a lot of them were able to successfully go to college and go to school and have some type of career or job.

Charlene Miciano: Mhm mhm. Wow that's a really cool story, wow (laughs). So, I guess, looking back if you were to give yourself advice to— maybe yourself as you are entering college, I guess, knowing the things that you do now, what would you tell yourself?

Marko Gutierrez: Well, I think that I would tell myself a couple things. Number one: I think going into college, one of the things I think many students, not just myself face, is like the imposter syndrome right that you don't belong, especially as a first generation student. You think like, "Man I think they made a mistake in letting me in or something." But, you know, it takes a couple weeks or sometimes a year to feel comfortable and that you deserve to be there, so I think I would tell myself to believe in myself. To believe in my abilities and take advantage of opportunities when they're presented to you because sometimes you let them go by and you realize, "Wow that would have been a valuable experience". I think that I would tell myself as a college student not to feel rushed or pressured to get through college, but to really live the experiences, take advantage of experiences, seek opportunities, do the things that you want to do because you're only in those four or five years one time in your life and once you begin a job

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or career, your time is really eaten up up a lot. And so you really can't do the things like study abroad or do internships or work with professors on projects and stuff like that. That at the time it might seem like "Oh man, I like I want to enjoy my summer or do this or do that," but really

those experiences are things that you're gonna remember for the rest of your life or they'll present or open doors for you, so I think that I would tell myself to not be afraid to explore opportunities. And also that, I think one of the things I figured out later in life, and I wish I would have done this in college is that, when you're presented, sometimes with opportunities or situations, sometimes you're like "Oh well, but I don't know too much about that or I don't know how I would do that", but as an adult you kind of learn, you figure it out as you go along. And that we're smart enough to adapt and learn as we go and that shouldn't hold us— that idea that "Well yeah, but don't know exactly how we do that, or I don't know too much about that", but we can learn and we're in college for a reason, and being a lifelong learner's important, and I think that well when you're given opportunities, sometimes you know you're not too sure about yourself, but we can we can always figure it out.

Charlene Miciano: That's really great advice, yeah definitely. To always keep in the mindset of growing and adapting that's really, that's really important, thank you for sharing that. Let's see, so you did talk a bit about your professor that influenced you to become a teacher and major in English. Do you remember, any other I guess— career or... life defining experiences that you had in college, anything that you remember?

Marko Gutierrez: Yes— I think one of the greatest things that, from the professors that I remember was— and something that as an adult that you realize is the value of time. Time is so important and valuable. Everyone's so busy, but the professors who made time for me and other students are the ones I remember, because they sacrificed doing research or publishing their own work, or just like you know are getting ready for the classes to help someone out like me. Those are the ones that I remember and as an adult looking back like when I work with my students, I think the greatest gift that I can give 'em is my time and attention because it's super important. It makes people feel important. It makes a world of difference in people's lives. So I remember, another English professor, she would start every class saying "Welcome lovers of literature" and she would just be so positive about— Not everyone was an English major there, but she just made everyone feel so comfortable and positive. I remember that too. The feedback on your work, the people that took the time to offer meaningful valuable feedback was amazing as well, those professors. So yeah, the professors I think are the things I remember, most of my college experience and time, and also the people that I met. You kind of don't appreciate it till it's a little bit too late, but the friendships that you make in college, the people that you meet that really are a lot different from the people you meet in high school is just— so many different wonderful people that you meet and are exposed to new experiences, different perspectives

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and I think that's one of the things I miss most about college are just the casual conversations that you have and are able to have with your peers.

Charlene Miciano: Yeah definitely and you did touch upon— that you were first-gen so you were the first in your coll— first in your family to get a degree right? So, were there any

resources at the time when you went to college? Because I know at schools, now they have a lot of first gen resources, community resources.

Marko Gutierrez: One of the things that I took advantage of was I was accepted into the EOP program (Educational Opportunity Program) so I took advantage of that, in terms of the academic advising that they offered. So I received support that way. But back then that I can remember, there weren't as many resources as there are now, but if there was one, the biggest one was the EOP program, just the academic advising part alone was beneficial. But, as I was graduating, my last year there as a senior, they did start, something that I believe still continues today, they started the mentorship program, where an upperclassman would mentor a lower classman, a freshmen. And I was able to work as a mentor and even though I didn't have a mentor when I was a freshman, I saw the value in that, when I became a mentor and mentoring fresh incoming freshmen, having someone that can help you navigate college who really hasn't had no family member go to college before, it was something that was I thought was powerful.

Charlene Miciano: Mhm mhm definitely, Yeah, to have someone that has been in your shoes before. Yeah that's very powerful mm hmm. I'm going to circle back around to San Ysidro High 'cause I have a couple more questions. So, I feel like I missed this, I'm sorry about this, but how did you end up at San Ysidro High again? I think you did talk about how you ended up being an AVID teacher at Sweetwater High sorry.

Marko Gutierrez: Correct yes so, in my teaching credential program at San Diego State, I had a professor, I took one class, I forgot the name of the class, but it was part of the teaching credential program but he worked for the Sweetwater District as a human resource, he was in charge of human resources. So, any teacher that wanted to be hired by the district category had to be interviewed by that person. And so there was a job fair and I interviewed first to get hired by the district. And so I interviewed with the professor. I, you know, I did well in his class, so I did well in the interview. And he hired me in the district. From there, you go to looking for open positions at different schools, and so I remember interviewing the very first school I interviewed with was San Ysidro High School. They had some openings and it was a brand new school. They had only been open for one year.

Charlene Miciano: Wow.

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Marko Gutierrez: Actually two, sorry two years, when I interviewed they had only been open two years. They were going to start their third year of being open and I interviewed and the interview went okay. (laughs) I remember, I made a mistake, I forgot to leave my resume and my transcripts and after the interview, and I was driving home, and I was like “Oh man, I forgot to leave that.” And I called the secretary, and I said hey, I go “I don’t know if it’s too late, I forgot” and she says, “Yeah no go ahead, come drop it off”, so I went back. And I’m glad I did. because

about a week later, I got a call for a second interview and I met with people from the English department. And you know they asked questions and I showed them a portfolio and everything and then I was hired. So San Ysidro was actually the first school I interviewed— the first school I interviewed for ended up hiring me and that’s how I ended up at San Ysidro.

Charlene Miciano: Wow that’s great (laughs). And you’ve been there since.

Marko Gutierrez: I’ve been there since yeah, (nods) I’ve been there, since.

Charlene Miciano: That’s really cool. Are there any students that have had the most impact on you? Any memorable students and what do you remember about them?

Marko Gutierrez: Yeah, I have there— there have been quite a few. Students that have faced enormous adversity in their lives and have shown just a remarkable ability to be resilient and they, I remember them because they inspire me. From students whose— I remember one student. I’ll say a few anecdotes, one student who— his parents, one of the parents had a gambling addiction and would steal the money from the family and the kid had to hide money from their parent was just— for someone that young have to go through that was remarkable and still being faced with that kind of responsibility or pressure and still do well in school was remarkable. Another student who had a health issue with their heart and was told that they weren’t going to live very long. But yet their attitude about life and so easily could have given up or not done well in school because they could figure out “What’s the point?” That person... I’ll always remember that person because of their outlook on life. Just what a great person they were, human being, and just how inspired I was because they truly live life every moment, and enjoyed every moment. And they did things like they took risks, they went out, they put themselves out there. They did things that most students— or took opportunities that most students wouldn’t and was just very inspirational to me. Other students who you know, they had to— in order to make a better life for themselves, they chose to come to study in the US or would have to cross the border at like two, three in the morning, just to come to school here. And the dedication that they had towards their education was remarkable, how far they had to come. And to take AP classes and to pass the AP test was very, also very inspirational to me, those students. So yeah, those are some students that I’ll always remember.

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Charlene Miciano: That's great, that's great. Do you keep in contact with some of these students or have you heard from where they've been now, what they're up to now?

Marko Gutierrez: Yeah luckily I do keep in contact with many students actually, many. Many students will reach out to me, a lot of them, you know. I remember one of the first students I ever had in AVID, she was one of those students that came from Mexico, first-generation student, went to UCSD. They ended up getting their PhD now and they come back and speak to

all my students. Yeah a lot of students tell me about their experiences like they went to Europe to study abroad or you know, they definitely keep in touch about what they're doing or some are working at like a non-profit. Or some are teachers somewhere in their, you know, in their own field. But I do keep in touch with quite a few, not all of them, obviously, but quite a few students, you know and sometimes you know I'll get an email or a message or a text message, or something about how they're doing. So yes, it's nice to keep up with them and keep in touch with them.

Charlene Miciano: Wow that's really inspiring to see where these people are going.

Marko Gutierrez: Yeah it's amazing.

Charlene Miciano: So there's still, there's still more to be accomplished that's really amazing, yeah.

Charlene Miciano: Have you seen any of your students become teachers, like you, as well?

Marko Gutierrez: Yes, a few I remember one of my students is now an elementary teacher. There are a couple, I want to say a couple— a couple of middle school teachers, so yeah a few. Sometimes they go in different fields but yes, there has been a few, yes.

Charlene Miciano: Right right, that's really great, that's really cool. Hmm lets see. I think we've approached yeah we've passed the 30 minute mark so would you want to continue the interview, or would you be fine ending the interview here?

Marko Gutierrez: I'm okay if we— I feel good about what we talked about (laughs) so I'm okay with ending it.

Charlene Miciano: Okay okay— just one last question, would you like to share anything else, for our interview.

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Marko Gutierrez: You know, I think the project is great, oral histories are great. I remember one of the things that I actually remember a lot of is that in college I had a chance to do an interview. We had to interview someone in an older generation and I interviewed my grandfather, and a lot of the things that I told you, I didn't know about my grandfather prior to the interview. And one of the great things I remember is that day, there were several family members there from my aunts and uncles who and other grandchildren, my cousins, who didn't know those stories and everyone was just kind of like sitting around the table, listening to him and it presents— oral histories, I think present an opportunity to give insight into important aspects of our past and learn from others, and I think it's important, so I want to thank you for doing this and letting us

share some experiences that I think other people can find interesting or inspiring or hopefully motivational.

Charlene Miciano: Definitely definitely no, thank you, thank you so much for taking your time out and being interviewed by me, I know, especially as a teacher you're very busy.

Marko Gutierrez: Oh no problem, thank you.

Charlene Miciano: Okay.