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My 50 years at SJSU

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My 50 years at SJSU by Gil Villagrán

A Farewell Address to my friends, colleagues upon my retirement

Note: this statement is much longer than I anticipated, but it does span fifty years in seven pages. You do not have to read all of it or any of it, you will not be tested on it, but if you are curious about SJSU history during the late 1960s, the anti-war era, and beyond, check it out.

My connection to San Jose State University began while in middle school in Santa Clara, where my Yale educated (Yale Math Study Group, the so-called “new math”) math teacher selected six of his students to attend a Saturday regional math workshop and contest event at SJSU. Our teacher drove us to the college as it was called in 1960, to Centennial Hall (now DMH). Five years later, as a high school senior, I returned to the same building to take ACT and later SAT college entrance and scholarship application exams.

In 1966, the year I graduated from high school, there were student protests against the Vietnam War in many college campuses, but not at Santa Clara University (two blocks from my high school, and across the street from St. Clair’s Church), where we worshiped every Sunday, and attended Catechism every Saturday and during summer school sessions. It was my father’s immigrant dream, as he declared every time we drove through that campus, blocks from our home, or attended high Christmas mass at the mission church, “my son will attend this university!”

I was accepted to SCU, and was even awarded a modest scholarship. But as I watched the TV evening news and read the SJ Mercury-News every morning, I perceived that there was a student led revolution against the war, against segregation and other injustices in our nation. But no protests at SCU, while at Berkeley there was the Free Speech Movement and at San Jose State College, there were the initial protests of rallies, teach-ins and marches. I did not want to miss out on the struggles for what we later called the peace and justice movement. So to my parents’ great disappointment and worry, I selected to enroll at SJS College.

As a freshman, I majored in Physics, minored in Math. As an immigrant child, at age five, who did not speak a word of English, before bilingual education was even conceived (years later by Dr. Ernesto Galarza), I excelled in math because it is logical, unlike the rules of English spelling and grammar, and numbers are easier to pronounce correctly than weirdly spelled English words. By fourth grade I became bilingual, and achieved high grades in all classes, not because I was smarter than my classmates, but because I loved learning.

My father, who was unable to finish 6th grade as a child in Mexico, when his father died, leaving his widowed wife and five siblings, encouraged my love of school. As the oldest son, he quit school to work (selling newspapers on a commuter train, janitor at a hospital, selling firewood, shining shoes in the plaza) to support his family. So I did well in school, earning all A's and often A+s. So I had every expectation that I could succeed in my college courses.

My father worked two jobs every day so our mom could provide well for their six children. Everyday as we came home, each with one or more friends, she had snacks (quesadillas, tacos, sandwiches, fresh fruit from our small backyard orchard. We often had as many as 12 kids doing homework on the kitchen table, the carpet, coffee tables, and backyard table. Many years later, as director of a gang prevention program at one of our Family Resource Centers, we created a homework club. As I saw our foster kids doing homework, I realized my mother had provided this service fifty years earlier for my siblings and all our neighborhood friends!

However, as I drove my motorcycle to my mwf 7:30 am Qualitative Analysis Chemistry IA course on the freeway 101, I passed trucks loaded with what I learned were Napalm bombs to be shipped out of Alviso harbor to Vietnam, I experienced a gradual but on-going awareness of a truth about our nation's war of choice, a war never declared and voted upon by Congress. For me, it was a gross betrayal of our Constitution and Democratic Ideals. I began each morning having breakfast before 5 am with my mom and dad—the time he left for work at a meat packing plant on Bayshore highway. After dad left for work and mom went back to bed, as my four sisters slept. In the quiet morning hours, I read Steinbeck, Herman Hess, Orwell, history, politics, and philosophy at the kitchen table—our only table. By 6 am, the San Jose Mercury News was delivered, and I read the news of the war, corruption by government and corporations.

After breakfast I rushed off to SJSU where, to my great frustration, there were no classes titled: "The U.S. War against Vietnam." But to the dismay of my professors, I turned every discussion in every class into a debate on the War. Some students and professors joined these discussions; some got angry and offered to throw us out of the classrooms. Almost every day, and certainly every week there was a teach-in on the 7th St. plaza, or planning meetings for the nationwide Vietnam War Moratorium, the student and faculty strike, or the many peaceful sit-ins, protests, marches through campus.

Attending class, as opposed to attending the almost daily teach-ins, noontime rallies, speeches, followed by spontaneous calls for a march to the president's office, the state or federal buildings, or the nearby Selective Service office (on Market street, across from the courthouse), also kept me from attending classes on chemistry, physics or general education courses.

I always intended to go to classes, which I had eagerly chosen at the beginning of every semester. However, the immediacy of the war and other injustices always prevailed in the **now** of napalm-burned children and their grieving parents on the nightly news.

So, I missed many classes, and attended many rallies, even hitch-hiking or driving to Stanford, SFSU, or UC Berkeley, and one summer to DC for an anti-war sit-in, and for special events such as Black Panther Party, SDS, Angela Davis, Tom Hayden, Harry Edwards, Bobby Kennedy, Ralph Nader, others.

One evening, Joan Baez, our local peace activist and folk singer, whose albums I listened to when not playing Dylan's albums came to speak, again in WSH, where I took Chemistry 1A and many other science classes, for an anti-war, anti-militarism address. This was while her husband, David Harris, former Stanford student body president, was in prison for refusing induction into the U.S. Army.

After she spoke, she was asked to sing. She smiled sweetly but declined, "I didn't come to perform tonight, but to inform and encourage everyone to organize against this brutal war. Besides, I don't have my guitar." But the dozens of gentle cheers continued, and she relented, "Ok, if anyone wishes to burn their draft card (illegal for males 18-50 years, \$10,000 fine, five years in jail.), I'll sing one song."

Without a moment of hesitation, I walk to the front, taking out my draft card. With a slightly shy smile, she took the card, read my name, asking, "Well, Gilbert Joseph Villagran, what song do you request?" I immediately I said, "With God on our Side," written and recorded by Bobby Dylan. "One of my favorites," She then she sang:

"Oh my name it ain't nothin'
My age it means less
The country I come from
Is called the Midwest
I was taught and brought up there
The laws to abide
And that land that I live in
Has God on its side..."

I would have gladly accepted my imprisonment of five years to hear her sing Dylan's plea for an end to wars in *her* voice, "You don't count the dead, when God's on your side."

Joan in her voice: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUZGGFOV6FM>

Some days later my physics 1A Mechanics (first course in my major), the final exam consisted of questions such as: if there is a mass of X kilos, at an angle of Y degrees, with Z foot-lbs. of energy, where will that mass land? However, the real and critical question was, in my mind, the mass is an ICBM with the payload of a nuclear bomb, and the question, if I remembered the formula and included the co-efficient of friction, then it was a matter of math to calculate the kilometers or miles where said mass would land.

I realized that the question, one of ten in the final exam, had a more existential meta question: so I put down my number 2 pencil, and my scan-tron answer sheet, and took out the blue book (now they are green) I had bought for my existential philosophy final that afternoon, and filled it with my answer of where the mass of x kilos would land.

My answer was a long-winded ramble: wherever that "mass" landed, it would kill humans, destroy their homes, schools, communities; it would rain radiation poison that would take years, if not centuries to decay (strontium-90 decays to a half-life in 800 years, possibly longer than human existence on Earth!). Therefore, I concluded, the weapons we have will destroy all life on our planet unless we stop teaching physics because all science is being perverted to making grotesque weapons for wars that cannot be won and which will only destroy our planet.

Professor Moreland would post grades on the door to his office by student's id number next to their final score, in descending order, such that highest grades on top, lowest at bottom. I did not expect for mine near the top, but next to my id number, he had hand written a note: "see me."

Seeing the light to his office on, I knocked, "Come in." I entered, he smiled, "so you are Mr. Villagran, please sit." There were 100+ students in the class, an amphitheater in our own Washington Square Hall, so he could not have known most student's names. But he did recognize me for sitting near the front, taking notes and occasionally asking for clarification of his very well organized lectures.

He said, "I appreciate the passion of your answer, young man, which you stated eloquently. However, you did not answer *my* question, which I thought was rather simple: plug in the X, Y, and Z, memorize the co-efficient of friction, and calculate with your slide ruler the kilometers where the mass will land.

"You sir, did not answer *my* question, rather, you answered *your own* question, which as a physicist, I am not qualified to grade. For that, you will have to go to another department. I have taken the liberty of consulting with Dr. Jacobs in the counseling dept., and he is expecting your visit. He will help you find where you should be, what major and courses fit in with your interest in the question you did answer. Please go see him right away."

Dr. Moreland softly stated, “but I have no alternative than to give you an F in the course.” I replied, “I know, but I did enjoy your class and learned a lot. Bye.”

Dr. Jacobs asked me to complete several questionnaires asking about my interests, preferences, etc. We made an appointment a week later, after a computer scored the questionnaire. The scoring presented me with a three-digit number that identified possible occupations, including Social Worker. He asked me what I knew about social workers. Our family had just adopted my baby brother at 6 months of age, so I told him that a county social worker had interviewed everyone in our family, mom, and dad, five kids individually. So in 1966, my senior year in high school, we got our baby brother. Seeing my enthusiasm, he suggested I might want to change my major.

I considered doing so, but I had not come to college to *train* for a job, but rather to understand the *what* of reality, or even more important to me, the *why* do humans kill each other. I changed my major to Philosophy, where Socrates, Plato and Sartre pondered the questions rolling in my head.

But to quote a cliché, “another shoe was about to drop,”

In 1967 a recruitment fair was scheduled at the administration building for the CIA, Dow Chemical, AT&T, all branches of U.S. military, FBI and other arms manufacturers, who we called, “war profiteers.”

Of course, there were protestors blocking public access to the building. By noontime, there were, according to the evening news reports, about five thousand people crowded into the intersection of 7th St. and San Fernando. As the crowd got denser, students wearing suits, who had appointments with the recruiters, could not get through the crowd, in spite of campus police efforts to escort them. These students shouted, “I have an appointment, I have an interview for a job!” Protesters shouted, “There is an illegal war, no business as usual!”

Suddenly, a petite older gentleman in a suit and tie approached the crowd from the perimeter, accompanied by a student carrying a cafeteria chair. The word came around that the white-haired man was Dr. Robert Clark, President of the University. A bullhorn was passed up and Dr. Clark introduced himself, gently asking for permission to join the demonstration in a dialogue with a representative of SDS, Students for Democratic Society, the organizers of the blockade. So even as more students crowded more densely, there was an eagerness to hear the dialogue between President Clark and SDS student Nick Kopke. They discussed the idea of an open university, peaceful protest, non-violent civil disobedience, the illegality of the war, the immorality of napalm—a grotesque weapon declared illegal by the Geneva Convention.

Sitting on the ground on a sunny afternoon, I realized that finally we were having the dialogue I yearned for in all my classes—a *real discussion* on the most important issue of our time—the *only question*: why are we killing people in Vietnam? This dialogue, passing the bullhorn, back and forth between Nick Kopke and President Clark went on for what seemed like an hour. But I noticed several tough looking men, older than most students, all with crew cuts instead of the long hair so common, some middle-aged, wearing business suits, also moved into the crowd. Someone said, “look at the roof of the Engineering building,” there were a number of police with cameras with telephoto lenses. But the peaceful dialogue went on, with talk of Nazi Germany, Negro youth sitting at lunch counters and getting beat up by cops and tough-looking white men, the Spanish Civil War, the illegal Lakota Ghost Dance. I, we, learned so much that afternoon, as other students and some professors joined the dialogue.

Then three Hell’s Angels wearing their colors (denim jackets, vests with skulls, #13 (stood for M patches), one menacingly waving a tire iron, another a motorcycle chain, the third a baseball bat stomped through the crowd, which gave them a wide berth. A TV camera crew asked the angels, “Why are you here?” the meanest looking one growled, “We’re here to protect the cops from the f--ing hippies.” Hearing this counter-intuitive statement, we all burst out laughing.

Possibly on queue, a police whistle blew, tear gas canisters were shot into the crowd, and dozens of police rushed in, but instead of uniforms, they wore coveralls with police badges (easier to wash the blood off)! With the tear gas, everyone ran, unable to see well, we tripped over each other. Some cried from the tear gas, other cried from being injured falling on the street concrete, falling atop each other, and my humanities professor had his forehead split by a tear gas canister shot by a SJ police officer. Within minutes the more than five thousand crowd ran in all directions, some hobbling held up by others, many crying and bleeding. Cops arresting those who could not run away and those too injured to run, still bleeding from head injuries by police clubs.

Several days later, I got a Special Delivery letter at home, stating: “The Trustees of the State University of California have determined that you, Gilbert Joseph Villagran, present a danger to the students, faculty and staff of the university. You are hereby ordered not to enter any building at any campus of the university. If you do, you will be arrested for trespass.”

The letter was delivered at 6 am, as I read the newspaper.

Consequently, I had the dishonor of being expelled from SJSU for being photographed at the demonstration. I was unable to attend the last few weeks of classes and I missed some final exams that I could not have passed very well for having missed so many classes. Thus, my high school almost 4.0 GPA fell to an ignoble 1.9 and descending...disqualified!

So I did what many disaffected youth did in those “*times that were a-changing...*” I hitchhiked to Big Sur with a back pack full of books: SJSU Scholar-in-Residence Alan Watts, The Tao Te Ching, Marx’s early writings, Hemingway, Malcolm X, B. Traven, Barbara Tuchman, Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Robinson Jeffers while camping out on the beach, along with a dozen other long haired freaks as we were called, which we turned into a badge of honor.

Eventually, I was able to re-enroll at SJSU, on probation, and now, as a philosophy major and sociology minor, I did well in classes, which I loved. I graduated with a BA, and my minor in Sociology qualified me for a social worker job for Santa Clara County Social Services Agency. I worked there for the next 30 years, a job I loved and hated. I loved it for the goal of serving families with great needs, along with truly committed co-workers. A job I sometimes hated because I saw the injustice by slumlords and employers, and the violence by drug addicted boyfriends and parents. But with great training and effective strategies, even these challenges could often be overcome. Three years later I returned as a social work MSW graduate student (1974-76). The MSW qualified me for promotions, UC-Berkeley BASSC Manager Training, and greater opportunities. During my tenure at the agency I held many positions, including SW supervisor, manager, program developer, proposal writer, assistant to the planning director, director of a youth gang prevention program for youth in foster care funded by the San Jose Mayor’s BEST program, public information officer, trainer, Ombudsman.

From 1995 to 2016 I taught classes at the School of Social Work, usually one class per semester. So I am now retiring as a Senior Lecturer. The narrative is my farewell address from teaching, with fondness and gratitude for my colleagues at the School of Social Work, and other faculty and staff at San Jose State University.

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