

## Transcript of Michael Nava '76

*Interviewed on August 20, 2019 by Kirk Woundy*

Kirk Woundy: Michael Nava, thank you for taking time to tell your story as part of CCs Untold Stories Project.

Michael Nava '76: Sure.

KW: I thought we would start today just by starting at the beginning, or at least at your beginning. I read that you were born in Stockton, California, and grew up in Gardenland, a suburb. When you think back to Gardenland in the '50s and '60s, what do you think of?

MN: Well, just a small correction. I was born in Stockton, but then I grew up in Sacramento. Gardenland is not exactly a suburb, it's more of... it was in the unincorporated area of Sacramento County, and it was the place where Mexicans were allowed to own property in the '20s and '30s. Because of covenant restrictions, Mexicans and African Americans were banned from owning property in White neighborhoods, so they were sort of forced to live wherever they could buy. That's where my family settled after they came up from Mexico in 1920 as refugees from the Revolution.

KW: What's-

MN: So what was it like?

KW: Yeah.

MN: It was, essentially, it was a Mexican village transplanted into California. It was not ... It had been a farmland, a huge farm, that had been sold off into smaller plots. The houses had big plots, but they were... some were just shacks, some were a little more elaborate than that, but there were no sidewalks, there were no streetlights, even as I was growing up. My mother remembers going to get water from a pump. When I was a kid the outhouse was still there, although it wasn't in use anymore. It was a neighborhood of poor, rural people. People kept chickens, and cows, and horses well into the '60s. Everyone had a truck garden where they grew some of the food that they ate. It was not the "Leave It to Beaver" America of the '50s and '60s.

- KW: Can you describe your family when you were growing up?
- MN: As I said, my family originally settled there around 1920, so I was surrounded. My grandparents lived next door to us, we had cousins living down the street. It was sort of a large, extended family. My own nuclear family was my mother and my step-father. I never knew my father because he and my mother never married and he disappeared before I was born. It wasn't the classic nuclear family of America of the '50s and '60s. It was a larger extended family where everyone was in and out of each other's houses. It was a collective.
- KW: How many brothers and sisters did you have?
- MN: My mother had six children, so I have five half siblings. We don't have the same father, but we have the same mother, so there were six of us.
- KW: How would you describe yourself as a child?
- MN: I was ... That's a hard question. I think once I got into school and learned how to read I took to learning like a fish to water. That really set me apart, my interest in school and the fact that I did really well academically starting from a very early age because in my family my mother graduated from high school, my step-father had a second grade education, and no one had ever gone to college. Education was not valued in my family and I think in many of the families in Gardenland, just it wasn't important. What was important was that you get through high school if you could, that you get a job that paid you a living wage, you got married, and you had kids. Right from the start I broke the mold. I was sort of an introverted bookworm, and very interested in school, and very curious about the world beyond our neighborhood.
- KW: I read that the neighborhood, at the time, had the largest population of Mexican Americans in Sacramento. To what extent did your family talk about race and what it meant to be a Mexican American?
- MN: Never. I mean, this was ... we just were. We didn't talk about it. No one thought about it. We were not self-conscious that way the way that people are now about those issues. It was just the way it was. It was largely a Mexican community. There were a few poor Whites, the so-called, "Okies", people who ... poor White families who came to California during the Dust Bowl and ended up settling in Gardenland with us. But there was no self-consciousness about, "We're Mexican, and we're an island of brown in a white world." I mean, we just were. I mean, those discussions, what you're talking about, that's quite recent, that consciousness.
- KW: How often would your family get outside of Gardenland and see Sacramento downtown, or other areas where maybe it looked and felt different?

MN: Never. I mean, my mother who is 85 years old lives in the house next door to the house where she was born. I think she's probably been on an airplane, I would imagine, fewer than a half dozen times. Maybe only two or three times, one of them was to come to Colorado to see me graduate. She's never been out of the country. She rarely leaves her neighborhood. She rarely leaves her house at this point, but it was a very insular community and people loved to go to work then they came home. The only experience I have as a child of going to downtown Sacramento was when I went with my grandmother. We would take the bus and she would go pay the utility bill at PG&E, and so forth. She didn't speak English, so I would go and translate for her. But our contact with the White world was quite limited. Yeah, it was, as I say, it was ... I don't know what your experience is of third world countries, but if you can imagine an isolated village somewhere, that's pretty much what we were.

KW: Was there what you might describe as kind of a culture or masculinity? Did you talk at all or get a sense at all of kind of what it would or should mean to be a man?

MN: No, again, all of these things ... these things were never spoken of, they just were. It's much more complicated than that. I mean, I know that Mexican culture is often depicted as being patriarchal and machismo, and certainly it is. There is a kind of ... there was a kind of sense that I see looking back, but certainly it wasn't articulated then, which was that wives belonged to their husbands and children belonged to their parents, literally as their possessions. And that men were at the top of the pecking order, but that being said, it was actually women who ran the families and women who provided the structure of the family in which we all grew up. I had very ... the men generally interacted very rarely with their children, maybe more with their male children than their female children. But their main rules were to make money to support the family.

MN: The rearing of children, and the transmission of any kind of cultural and family history, those were really the province of the women, which gave them a lot more influence over the kids than the dads had. But certainly I saw, that at least formally, women were subject to men. My own mother, for example, I was born out of wedlock as they used to say, and she'd already had a child from her husband, her first husband. For a Mexican American young woman in the 1950s to have two children and no man was a disgrace to the family, it was also just, it was unimaginable. There was no sense that she could have raised us on her own. She basically married the first man who proposed to her who was my step-father, who happened to have been kind of a sociopath. But she stayed married to him for 30 years, notwithstanding the fact that he was a very cruel man, because she could not imagine an existence without a man, even an inadequate and awful man.

KW: I've read that you were 12 years old when you decided that you were gay, and that you came out at age 17. Is that right?

MN: Well, you know, I was 12 years old when I had the revelation that I was gay, I didn't actually decide it.

KW: Sure.

MN: When I reached puberty, like everyone else, I began to discover my sexuality and I realized that while other boys were talking about girls, in sort of romantic and crude 12 year old boy sexual ways, I wasn't interested. But what I was interested in were boys. I really ... I didn't have a vocabulary for it except for the word queer, which back then was not, you know, it's been reclaimed now, but back then it was an epithet on par with the "N" word, and certainly in my family and in my community. One day I just ... I realized it. It was really a revelatory moment. I was walking to school and I heard someone say, "You're a queer." And I looked around and I realized there was no one there, I had said it. It had bubbled up from some place inside of me. Yeah, I was a queer. After that moment I never had any doubt about it. I wasn't happy about it. I knew I had to hide it, but I didn't pretend to be straight. I didn't date girls or any of that, I just tried to keep my head down and avoid that particular topic until I was 17 when I classically fell in love with my best friend. I told him because I couldn't keep it in anymore, and that began the process of my coming out.

KW: That's five years during your teenage years, it just feels like that would be really ... it could be really difficult to have to keep that to yourself. Did you find it to be that difficult?

MN: Yeah, difficult doesn't really begin to describe how anguished that period of my life was. It was possibly the worst period of my life. I think it's difficult for people who are heterosexual to imagine having to conceal an essential part of yourself, especially during those years when straight boys and girls were learning the rituals of courtship, and mating, and I was on the outside looking in. When I was 13 I actually made a sort of a semi-serious suicide attempt. That's how difficult it was. Fortunately, I survived. But yeah, it scarred me just as it scarred many gay men of my generation. My story is not unique and many were in the closet for a lot longer than I was and had even a harder time than I did. I was fortunate with that when I came out I found supportive friends and teachers who told me, "Well, that's fine." But even at that point it was 1972 in California, there was still a sodomy law on the books. Homosexuality was still classified as a mental disease by the American Psychiatric Association. Yeah. I was kind of out, but there was really nowhere to go. Then I went to CC.

KW: What led you to CC?

MN: Well, I'm sort of the tail end of the '60s generation and I was interested in looking at schools that were progressive in some way or another. I looked at Antioch in Ohio, which was sort of ... no longer exists, but was then sort of famously a hotbed of student ferment. I looked at UC Santa Cruz, which had just started, which had this unique five colleges approach. And I looked at CC because of the block system. I was looking for something different than the standard quarter semester template that most colleges adopted, so I applied to those schools and CC gave me the most money, and there was no way I was going to go to college without basically being subsidized by loans and scholarships, so that's where I went.

KW: Had you visited campus before you arrived for your first classes?

MN: No, I didn't. I looked at the catalog.

KW: What were your first impressions?

MN: Oh, gosh. You know, it's so long ago. I don't really ... I remember going into Slocum. I was on the fourth floor and I'd actually communicated with my roommate over the summer who was this lovely boy from Minneapolis. I think what I felt when I got to CC was I was really excited because it was what I had been striving for, really from the time I was 10 years old and I was there. It was this beautiful campus and I quickly met some wonderful teachers and I made friends among my classmates, my fellow freshmen, as we called them then. It was, I think that those first few months were really just a very exciting experience for me.

KW: Did you have any second thoughts about leaving the Sacramento area, or any pull back that way, maybe even from your family?

MN: No, I couldn't wait to get away. Another reason I went to CC and applied to places like Antioch is I wanted to get away from them. I felt at the time I was burning my bridges, of course, you never really burn your bridges with your past or your family. But once I was at CC I went home the first summer between freshman and sophomore year, but after that I didn't go home again. I stayed at CC over the summers.

KW: Wow. What do you remember about the diversity of the student body when you first arrived?

MN: Well, it was non-existent really. I mean, I remember one Black student. There were a handful of Mexican American students, and they were Mexican American I don't know that there were any other nationalities represented. Ken Salazar who later became senator and cabinet member was the head of MEChA. But it was a very small group. I think there must have been a Black student union, so there must have been more than one Black student on campus, but honestly I can't

remember, I just remember Jim because he was in my first class. I don't remember any Asian students at all, there may have been. But it was White. It was probably 95% White.

KW: You mentioned MEChA and I had come across a little something on that in some research about this time period, just that it was a group that was formed to educate people on, and to celebrate, Chicano heritage. Were you involved in that group personally?

MN: My involvement was sporadic. It was not really ... that may have been their mission statement, but really, it was just a place for the handful of Chicano students to find refuge with each other, and it existed more as a social organization than as a political one. My problem with MEChA was it was very traditional in terms of gender roles, and all the kids were straight, and they were sort of reproducing the whole male/female dynamic of the Mexican American community that I had just left. I didn't really feel there was a place for me there. I went to a couple of meetings and then I just knew, yeah, I can't be gay. I can't be out here. I'd have to go back in the closet and I'm not going to do that. I had very little to do with MEChA after my first year.

KW: Okay. What was the process like? I don't know I don't know if process is the right word, but in terms of being out as a gay man on campus. This is something that you had kept to yourself pretty much through your schooling back home. How did you share that with people on campus?

MN: Well, I just told people, you know? If they asked me, I would tell them. I didn't make an announcement, but I didn't conceal it. The professors who I was closest to, people like Ruth Barton, who was my mentor there, Peter Blasenheim who just retired, I told them I was gay when it came up. I think I referred to it in my third or fourth year in a newspaper article I wrote. I don't know that I announced it, but I made it clear I wasn't straight. But yeah, it was not a political coming out process, it was more that I no longer lied about who I was when the issue arrived, or arose, rather.

KW: How was that usually received? I know it may have been different person to person, but did you find that people just kind of accepted it and said, "Okay, great." And moved on, or was it more complicated?

MN: No. I mean, the people who were my friends and who loved me, they had no issue with it. It was just part of who I was. My two best friends at CC were David Owen who later became a writer for The New Yorker and has written a lot of books, and he and I are still in touch, and Jim [Byers 00:21:58] who was president of the Sigma Chi frat house. Jim and Dave knew, and we would get together two or three times a week and drink and talk poetry, and literature, and it was just not an issue between us. It was not an issue with my friends. But that's in part because I

could pass as straight. I mean, I had a friend at CC who was... whose mannerisms were somewhat identifiably gay and he was basically hounded out of school. He dropped out in his second year because he was so bullied by the frat boys who lived in that quad behind Palmer Hall. He would walk across that quad and they would jeer him, and hoot him, and call him names. And yeah, he eventually dropped out.

KW: Wow. For you, did it start to feel, after a time, and maybe not a long time I don't know, but did it start to feel as though you were developing community there? If so, where did you go beyond the friendships that you've mentioned so far find that?

MN: Well, I found community, in a sense, among the ... there was a very lively little student writers colony there, it's interesting. I said David Owen, who transferred to Harvard in the second year, he established himself as a fairly prominent magazine writer. And David Mason who was a year or two behind me, of course, became poet laureate of Colorado and has had a very distinguished career as a poet. Gregg [Easterbrook 00:23:53] was there when I was there, he's gone on to become a magazine writer and a book writer. And David Hendrickson, who is in the poli sci department now has written a number of books. There was, for a school its size, there was this really vibrant writers community, so we were all pals. David Fenza, who later became head of the American ... the Associated Writers Program, was the poet there. There were all these young poets and writers, and we'd hang out together. That was really my community.

MN: Then my other community was I was in the History Department because I couldn't stand the English Department — it was so male, and misogynistic, and homophobic. And I developed a community there with Peter Blasenheim and Susan Ashley, and sort of their acolytes. I did have those two sources of support and friendship, for which I am deeply grateful. A lot of us hung out around Ruth Barton, she was kind of the mother hen to many of us, and she was married to TK Barton who was in the History Department, so that's kind of where my worlds intersected. On weekends they often had a full house of students. I look back now and I think they were saints to put up with us. I mean, we would just wander in and out of their house eating and drinking their stuff and they never said anything. Their house was always open to us.

KW: Was it one of the professors who you've mentioned who introduced you to mystery novels?

MN: Yeah, Ruth did, actually. I was in my senior year and that was a very difficult year because I didn't know what I was going to do and I was faced with having to go back to Sacramento. It was in the middle of a recession, I had a history degree, and no safety net, so I didn't know what was going to happen. I was quite anxious, and to divert me she told me, "Oh, you should start reading these books." So she

gave me ... I think she started me out with Rex Stout who wrote the Nero Wolfe books and then she gave me P.D. James and some of the English writers. Then I discovered Raymond Chandler on my own. Yeah, it was Ruth introduced me to mystery novels because she was a very sophisticated woman of great literary taste, I just assumed, "Oh, these must be good books if she likes them." No one told me that mystery fiction was considered junk fiction.

KW: What did you like about them?

MN: Well, I liked the fact they had plots, that they told stories. The writing was, you know, P.D. James, Raymond Chandler, these writers, they're very good writers, so it was just a pleasure to read them. But I like the puzzle aspect of mysteries very much and that's basically what first attracted me to them. I didn't read much fiction when I was in college because I was a poet, so I read reams and reams of poetry, and studied poetry, and thought about poetry, and wrote poetry, but I wasn't all that interested in fiction, except I really liked these mystery novels because they had plots, characters, action. I mean, they were stories.

KW: Before we leave your time at CC, I just wanted to ask if there were any particularly memorable experiences that you had in the classroom, or even outside of the classroom, but while a part of a class at CC? When you think back to your time as a student, what do you remember as vivid memories?

MN: Well, I remember, and I've written about this, Ruth Barton died several years ago and I gave one of the eulogies at her memorial service. I remember that first day it was a creative writing class and just walking into one of the parlors at, oh I think it was Montgomery, it was one of the old buildings, and sitting there and then she was late and she came in, and she was this disheveled little woman brushing dog hair and cigarette ash off her lapel. She was not my idea of a college professor, and she had this great Texas drawl. I just, you know, that's my most vivid memory was that first day of class and just, I don't know, I was so taken by her. You know, I have lots of memories of Dave, and Jim, and me sitting in one of our crappy apartments getting drunk and reading poetry to each other. It was an odd thing to do, I guess, but we would. We'd spend hours, we'd read our poetry to each other, we would read poets we liked to each other, and then we would kill off a bottle of scotch.

MN: Susan Ashley is a brilliant teacher and her course 20th century European history was one that we all wanted to get into because she was a teacher who made history come alive and she was passionate. It was just really exciting to study the Spanish Civil War with her because she made it seem as if it were going on at the moment. Intellectually, CC was just an amazing place to have gone in that period. Of course, we didn't think about what we were going to do afterwards, we didn't think about careers and jobs. I tell people I spent my four years at college smoking pot and reading books I wanted to read, which isn't too far off from the truth.



- KW: Do you look back on it, overall, fairly fondly?
- MN: That part, yes, I do and I'm forever grateful for the college, and for the nurturing and support I got there. That's where I was told by Ruth I could be a writer. But I was out, but there was ... I was kind of the only homo on campus, so it was, from that point of view, it was a very lonely and frustrating time also. Socially, romantically, sexually, it was very desolate. It was a very desolate time, so those two things were happening at the same time.
- KW: There was no real energy then around gay rights on campus at that point?
- MN: No. I don't even know that there was ... I'm sure there must have been other gay students, but they were deep, deep in the closet.
- KW: You graduated in 1976 and you already mentioned that you weren't really sure what your next steps would be. How did you wind up moving in the direction of law?
- MN: Well, I got a Watson fellowship, so I was away for a year studying poetry in Argentina, and I came back to Sacramento and, of course, that was no more useful than my degree in history in terms of career. I was in Sacramento for a couple of years and I just thought, "If I stay here I'll kill myself. I need to do something else. I need further education." I didn't want to go get a degree in history because I had no interest in teaching and there were no MFA programs back then except Stanford and Iowa, which I didn't even know about those really, so there was no place to pursue a creative writing degree. My interest in history also encompassed an interest in law and politics, so it had been in the back of my mind that maybe law was a potential career path. I decided, "Okay, well I'll take the LSAT. I'll apply to three schools. I'll apply to Berkeley, Harvard, and Stanford, and if I get into one them I'll go be a lawyer. If I don't get into any of them I'll think of something else to do." It was really that random. I applied to those three schools and Stanford took me as an early accept and Harvard wait-listed me, and rejected me, so I off I went to Stanford.
- KW: How did you find Stanford as an institution to be a part of, as compared to Colorado College?
- MN: Well, I tell people it was the difference between living with a loving, boisterous, but sort of poor family and then living with your rich grandparents. Stanford was the real deal in terms of privilege, much more so than CC was. My experience there, I hated law school, I nearly dropped out. After the intellectual feast that had been undergraduate school the study of law was just deadly and it was both complicated and dull, which is the worst possible combination. So I sort struggled through law school. I loved Stanford itself and I got laid a lot, so I finally was able to catch up

on that front because it was the late '70s and we were just down the road from San Francisco. So there are many things about Stanford that I remember, and my classmates were wonderful. I still count a number of them as my friends. On the one hand it was a positive, socially I would say, but academically I couldn't wait to get out of there. I just loathed the study of law. Fortunately, being a lawyer is a million times more interesting than studying law.

KW: And you went, after school, I read that you worked for a few years for private firms. You told *The New Yorker* in an interview that, quote, "There was no way as a queer Latino boy I could survive in those all-male, upper-middle-class, White, elite echelons." End quote. You had dealt with a lot of that upper-middle-class White elitism, it sounds like, at Stanford. Was this different in some way, or was it a matter of hitting your limit?

MN: Well, it was different in that they would have been my bosses. I mean, Stanford, I was surrounded by it, but they didn't... those people didn't control me, they were just my classmates. There were also enough gay classmates, minority classmates, in my law school that I didn't feel completely isolated. But when I worked for these two law firms in the summers between my first and second year, and second and third year. It was, yeah, it was just like I couldn't hack it. I'd have to go back into the closet, and in fact, I was told by an associate there, who knew I was gay, she said, "You can't be there here." I just thought, "Oh screw this, I'm not going to do this. It's not worth it. All they can offer me is money and my life is worth more than the salary." So I started to look for other options. It was actually after law school, my first job was as a prosecutor in Los Angeles, and that was great. That was a lot of fun, if putting people in jail can be said to be fun.

KW: But when you got out of the private firms, can you kind of describe what road you took to stay in law but to have a different experience?

MN: Yeah, I chose public service, basically. I was in... I was a city attorney in LA for four years, and mostly on the criminal side. They do both criminal and civil work for the city. At the end of four years I'd come to a crossroads, which if I continued on that path I would have to stay in criminal law and I didn't really want to do that. At that point I actually went back into private practice for a year and a half, I worked at an appellate firm. I learned how to be an appellate lawyer there, for which I'm deeply grateful, but again, the law firm experience was not what I wanted. Then I heard about these jobs basically being a research and staff attorney for judges on the California Court of Appeal. We basically researched and wrote the opinions of the judges, in consultation with them, of course. I was hired by Arleigh Woods, who was the first African American woman appointed to the Court of Appeal, and that's what I did for the next nine years in LA. I worked with her as her staff attorney.

MN: That was a fantastic job, and at the same time I had started writing the Rios novels so I was quite busy. When she retired I came up to San Francisco and I ended up working at the California Supreme Court in a number of capacities, one of them was working as a staff attorney for Carlos Moreno who was only the third Latino justice ever appointed to the court. At the end of my career I was working on death penalty appeals. Yeah, I spent most of my law career working as a judicial attorney in the California appellate court system. It was fantastic. I had, I think, one of the best careers you can have in the law because I got to do pure law, I didn't have to worry about the business end, and I got to work on cases that had public significance. In some tiny way, I was able, I think, to contribute to the development of the law in California.

MN: One of the cases that came up when I was in the Supreme Court was the gay marriage case and Moreno was on the right side of that, so our staff worked on that case. Yeah, it was a great career. I also spent time on various committees and commissions trying to work toward diversifying both the profession and the judiciary, which led me to run for judge in 2010. It was kind of... My becoming a lawyer was almost unintentional because I couldn't think of anything else to do, but I am very grateful that I did and that I had the career path I did because it also gave me, my protagonist is a lawyer, and it gave me stuff to write about in my fiction. I did it for 35 years and at the end of 35 years I was done, and so moving on to the next phase of my life.

KW: But you didn't wait to kind of start your literary career until after you were done. You were kind of building these careers simultaneously. Can you just talk a little bit about the commitment that that took and why writing, specifically writing the Henry Rios novels was just so important to you?

MN: Well, you know, people said, "When did you decide to become a writer?" I didn't decide to become a writer, I was born with the aptitude for language, and the love of language. I wrote my first poem when I was eight years old and I began to think of myself in self-conscious way as a writer when I was 12. It's like I never chose to be, it was just a creative impulse that was present in me and that I felt compelled to express. Even in law school I was writing, and I never stopped writing. In law school I stopped writing poetry because it just kind of dried up, but I still wanted to write so I thought I'd try my hand at fiction. And I didn't want to write that first semi-autobiographical turgid novel that every young writer writes. I thought, "Oh, I'll write a mystery because then I'll be forced to create characters other than myself and to think of a plot, and to learn how to write dialogue."

MN: My first novel I wrote as an experiment in writing fiction, really. It just never occurred to me that Henry Rios would not be Mexican or gay. That was never a thought, because I can't write dishonestly. That would be a violation of whatever gift I have as a writer. I wrote that book, I wrote it in my third year and then I put it away and went off to become a lawyer because my life got a lot more interesting.

Much more interesting than what I was doing on paper. When I came back to it, but again, the impulse, the need to write never left me, eventually I came back to it and I finished it, and it got published after many rejections. It published by a small, gay publisher. Then he asked me, "Oh, do you have another one?" I hadn't actually thought I was going to write a mystery series, but that's what he wanted, so I wrote the second one.

MN: When the second appeared I got a call from an agent, a literary agent in New York who said, "Do you have an agent?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, you know, if you continue to write these books I can get you a deal with a big publishing house." So I said, "Okay." And he did. He got me a two-book deal with what was then called Harper and Row, it's now HarperCollins. Just as becoming a lawyer was kind of serendipitous, becoming a mystery writer was also serendipitous. But as I began to get more involved in the books and I began to think more seriously about what I was doing, I saw that there was an opportunity in writing about a gay Mexican American lawyer to educate people about the reality of the experience of what it's like to be gay, what it's like to be Latino, to slip that in along with the mystery.

MN: The books were really critically quite well-received and reviews commented on that. They said, "He's a very good mystery writer, but there's something more in these books than there is the mystery. There's a story here that no one else is telling." Then it turned out in the '90s, again, I was part of a group. I mean, there was Walter Mosley was writing the Easy Rawlins books. Sara Paretsky, a feminist writer, was writing the V.I. Warshawski books. There were other Latino mystery writers like Manuel Ramos in Denver. There was this whole group of mystery writers who were basically turning the genre on its head by turning into protagonist characters, in classic noir, who had been there for sort of comic relief, or had been really targets of ridicule.

KW: Your series, as you said, was well-regarded, and well-received. In the early 2000s, I mean, you received a number of awards, but one of the awards you received, or one of the modes of recognition that you got was a doctorate of humane letters from CC. I was curious as to what kind of meaning that had for you.

MN: Well, that was Dave Mason and Ruth's doing, I think. It came out of nowhere, and it made me very happy, actually, because I went back to a campus which was, you know, in some ways much different. I mean, there was a gay student group on campus and there were more kids of color, although still a pretty small percentage, but the atmosphere had changed. I mean, there was a consciousness about race and gender and those discussions. Discussions about those topics that didn't exist when I was there. I always felt I was part of CC's community, just because I did have a very, essentially, positive experience there. It wasn't like I thought, "Oh, they're finally accepting me." I never felt not accepted there. But I felt that in recognizing me, and one of the other recipients that year was a doctor, who I think is an Asian American woman who was quite prominent in her field, I just

thought, “This is great, that CC is not ... it’s recognizing alums who come from sort of non-traditional backgrounds and who have gone on to accomplish things, in part, because of the education they got here.” I felt it was ... that was a wonderful experience.

KW: Of course, since 2003, you’ve continued to write and you had a novel published in 2014 called “The City of Palaces,” set in the time of the Mexican Revolution. As you mentioned earlier, that’s part of the story, or the Mexican Revolution plays into the story of your grandparent immigrating to the U.S. What made you want to, at that stage of your career, kind of dig into that period of history?

MN: Well, as I said, I wrote the last Rios novel in 2000, not the last as it turns out, but anyway I left the series in 2000 and I got very involved in this whole effort to diversify the legal profession, so I was mentoring a lot of Latino kids in law school and college, and just doing a lot of work with other people who were interested in that effort. It made me think of myself... it made me think of my Latino heritage in a way that I hadn’t before really, and to connect with it because the Latino community is a lot less homophobic now than it was when I was a kid and I just felt I found greater acceptance among younger Latinos than I ever had among my contemporaries. I just started thinking about my Mexican heritage and I wanted to write about it. I thought about my great-grandparents coming up from Mexico during the Revolution. I realized I knew very little about the Revolution, really, and so I thought, “I want to write a novel about this.”

MN: I was also interested in this character Ramon Novarro, who was a silent film star who came from Mexico during the Revolution, was one of the first generation of movie stars, and was a gay man, and pretty openly gay. I thought, “Well, I’ll write novel about Ramon Novarro in Hollywood.” But the backstory of how he got to Hollywood was so complicated, I kept pushing the story back farther and farther. I ended up writing “The City of Palaces,” in which the character who becomes Novarro doesn’t appear until halfway through as a nine-year-old boy. I’ve spent almost 20 years doing the research on that book. It was... yeah, it really brought me home to my Mexican roots in the way that I never had felt at home before. The book really came out of that experience.

KW: Now you’re returning to the Henry Rios character with a new book, as you said first in a number of years. You’ve also done a series of podcasts, Henry Rios podcasts. Can you describe the impetus for returning to this character?

MN: Yeah, Donald Trump. We live in a time when every form of bigotry and hatred is being empowered from the top by these awful people. Henry Rios is still a singular character in American literature. He’s gay, he’s Mexican American, he’s also a lawyer. He’s what I call an outsider insider, so he has mainstream credentials and he works in a mainstream profession where he’s very highly regarded, but his sense of himself is still, in some ways, as an outsider in that system. I don’t

think that that dynamic is really being explored very much in literature, so I felt I wanted to bring him back, that he's still relevant, more relevant perhaps now than ever, given what's going on in the country. The new book is actually set in San Francisco in 1984 right at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. I began writing it the day after the 2016 election, not intentionally as a response, but it turns out to be a response, because it's a reminder that there was another time in our recent history that seemed very, very dark for many of us, and for gay men particularly it felt as if we were going to be literally exterminated. I mean, physically exterminated.

MN: Certainly it felt that the tiny advances we'd made in the '70s and early '80s in LGBT rights were going to be rolled back. I mean, people were talking about quarantining HIV-positive people. There was an initiative in California to do just that. William F. Buckley was talking about tattooing people with HIV. I mean, it was all the horrors that people are experiencing now, so I wanted to remind people that we've been through this before and although there were great, tragic losses, we did survive it and it actually ended up changing the landscape of American politics and culture because people didn't sit still for AIDS and we didn't sit still for the epidemic and let it wipe us out, we fought back. In fighting back, I mean, we really forced America to confront gay people in a way that it never had before and I think that that, quite directly, led to things like marriage equality. I mean, I think you can draw the line from ACT UP and the resistance against the government indifferent to the epidemic, to the political advances that the LGBTQ community has made in the last 20 years.

KW: You're also starting your own publishing house. What are you looking forward to being able to do as a publisher?

MN: It's still very difficult for LGBTQ writers and writers of color to find publishers. The big five publishing companies are fairly hostile toward our work because they're market driven and they, in their benighted lack of wisdom, don't think that there's an audience for our books. Most queer writers, most writers of color are being published by small, independent presses. I wanted to provide another avenue for those emerging writers to get published, so that's really my goal. I mean, I was given a break by a small, gay publishing house in 1986, so I'd like to give that same break to some younger writers.

KW: Is there anything that we haven't talked about yet, whether it's related to CC or to something else, that you would like to talk about before we conclude the interview?

MN: I just want, again, to pay special tribute to Ruth Barton. I will say about CC, that the emphasis on teaching rather than on publishing was crucial to the intellectual development of so many of us because our teachers, and the block system, which encouraged these smaller classes, we had an intimate intellectual relationship,

and social and personal relationship with our teachers. So many of us of that generation I know can point to a particular teacher and say, “She or he is really responsible for making me the person I am today.” And that’s certainly true for me of Ruth Barton. I came to love her greatly and I miss her still. But she did live long enough to see me accomplish some of the things I accomplished. And I never failed and never fail to give her all the credit for what I’ve done as a writer.

KW: Wow. Well, thank you for, again, taking time to go to all these places with us today, and to kind of share a little bit more of your story for people who weren’t at CC in the ‘70s and who haven’t been on the path that you’ve taken since, really appreciate it.

MN: Thanks, Kurt. Pleasure.

KW: Thank you, Michael. Likewise.

MN: Bye.

KW: Bye-bye.

KW: Do I have to do anything?

Speaker 3: Yeah.