

The History All Around Us:

Roosevelt High School and the 1968 Eastside Blowouts

Using our schools as history “texts”

By BRIAN C. GIBBS

A TEXT CAN BE ANYTHING: a poem, a map, an old letter. To spur great learning, it needs to be provocative, powerful, open to multiple interpretations, and, above all, it needs to teach something profound. I use one of the greatest texts imaginable—Theodore Roosevelt High School in East Los Angeles.

Roosevelt High was constructed in 1923 in Boyle Heights. Like the neighborhood itself, Roosevelt has grown. Originally built to house up to 800 students, it is now home to more than 5,000 students. The original building sat on less than three acres of land but now engulfs more than 10. When I arrived in 1994, 21 years old and full of nervous excitement, I was amazed at the sheer size of it and intrigued by its many hidden corners. I remember wondering about the school’s ghost stories. Were they true or just urban myths? I always thought that there was a good assignment in there somewhere, but it took years to come to me.

As part of the school’s 75th anniversary celebration in 1998, glass cases were erected with paraphernalia from each of Roosevelt’s decades—prom photos, 1920s-style football helmets, old faculty photos. One year my students and I were talking about the political message of monuments and I thought about those cases.

“A monument can be anything from a statue, to a painting, to a park or project named for someone,” I told the students. “You know the display cases up front, near the main office?”

Dead silence.

“You know, the glass cases with the old stuff? Have you looked at them?”

“Well, I’ve looked at them, but not *looked* at them, you know what I mean, Mister?” Martin asked with a sly smile. I did know what he meant.

“Field trip!” I announced. “On your feet and follow me!”

I took my students to the glass cases, point-

ing out the photographs and memorabilia, reminding them that all of these were *monuments* and asked them to think about not only what was there but also what wasn’t, who chose to display these things, and why. During the impromptu tour a student found her mother in a photograph: “I didn’t know she was on the drill team. She never told me!” Another student found a photograph of Coach Burgueno, popular math teacher

and winning basketball coach, as a student.

On the way back to the classroom, I hung a quick right to show them a small memorial garden for Mike Morrell, a powerful and popular teacher who had died of AIDS 16 years before.

Students arrived back in the room, hot and a little cranky. “There were no tours listed on the syllabus,” one student complained. The bell rang, students left, and so ended my spontaneous lesson plan. I hoped the students had gained something from the tour but I wasn’t convinced.

During lunch one day that week, I saw a student of mine pointing out Morrell’s memorial

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to a friend, and at different times caught some of my students looking quizzically at the glass cases outside the hall. It also came up in class, with students referencing items in the glass cases: “Oh yeah, that wouldn’t help at all, just like that ridiculous leather football helmet in the case.”

I realized that the impromptu tour helped students see their campus and their school differently. They were actually *looking* at the campus. It was no longer just a run-down school that was *chafa* (East LA-speak for cheap), a place where they were forced to be.

Building Curriculum on a Building

I habitually wander during my free period. It helps me reflect on the day and plan for the next. I kept trying to figure out how I could expand what had already begun to happen with my students, turn the school into a full-fledged text. I knew that students from area high schools had staged a walkout in the late 1960s over the racism obvious in the deteriorated buildings, wretched pedagogy, lack of college planning, and narrow curriculum that students were forced, but I didn’t know much about it. I began my research by reading books, watching the film series *Chicano! History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, and searching the archives of the *Los Angeles Times* and the school newspaper. I also spoke to older faculty who had been staff or students back in the late 1960s. Slowly a lesson began to develop that could bring my unit on rights and struggle home to my students in East Los Angeles.

The unit I planned was an examination of the struggle for human and civil rights for women, African Americans, and Mexican Americans in the United States from the 1920s until the present day. I decided to begin with the 1968 Eastside Blowouts. The essential question I chose was: “How do we create change?”

I began the unit by asking students: “What would you be willing to do to create change? If you felt that women, African Americans, Latinos, or another group had no rights and you believed they should have those rights, what would you be willing to do to change that?”

“So, this is back in time?” a student asked.

“It could be back in time or the present, but what would you be willing to do?”

“You mean like kill somebody?”

“Well, would you be willing to die? Dr. King said, ‘A man who will not die for something is not fit to live.’ Would you agree with that? There are people in history who have given up everything in the hope that one day they and their people would have rights or equality. So what I’m asking is, what would you be willing to do for some massive change that you want?”

“I’m not willing to do anything,” a student said. “Isn’t that like the government’s job or something?”

“Well, the sad truth of it is that no rights have ever been given. Aldous Huxley said, ‘Liberties are not given, they are taken.’ In other words, all the rights we have today, others before us organized, fought, and struggled for them.

“Think of a right that is really important to you—the right to vote, maybe, the right to go

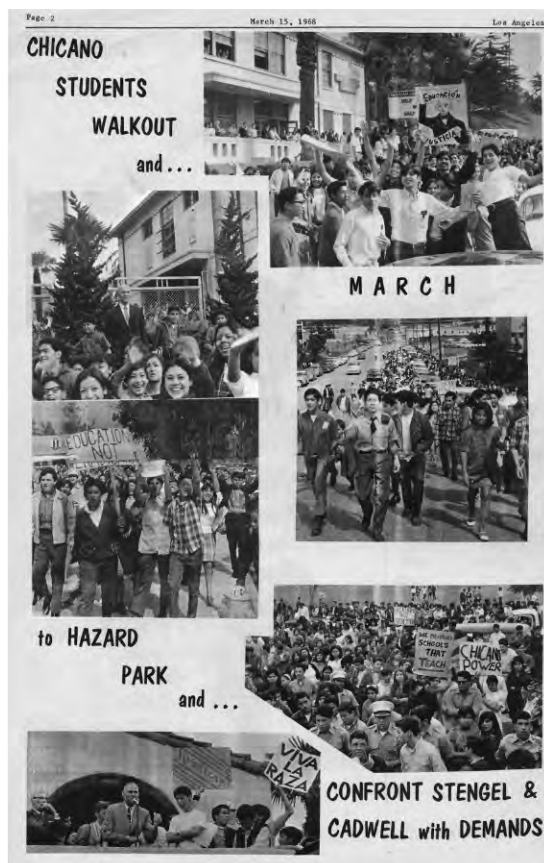


Photo layout from the *Chicano Student News*, March 1968.

to school, the right not to be drafted into the Army for a war you think is wrong. Then think what you would be willing to do to get that right for yourself or for other folks.” To feed their thoughts, I briefly described a few things activists have done and why. The list included hunger strikes, sit-ins, taking the risk of being beaten up or arrested, getting expelled from school.

I asked students to write about this question for a few minutes. When everyone had something on paper, I asked them to turn to the person next to them and talk about what they wrote and why. Then students shared briefly with the full class. It turned into a heated discussion. Some of the highlights:

“I would spend some money but not all of my money.”

“I would risk getting hit if it were something really important like the right to vote or to stop violence to women or something like that . . . but it would have to be important and I’d have to be mad.”

“I’d be willing to risk getting expelled if other people were doing it with me. I don’t think I could do it alone.”

“I’d do everything but get expelled; I’d rather risk my life than get kicked out of school. My mom would make sure that I didn’t get into heaven if I got kicked out.”

For homework, I had students interview two adults in their home about what they would be willing to do.

Field Trip to a Staircase

The next day I told students, “Exciting news, we’re going on a field trip.” Student faces filled with momentary exuberance but then quickly fell.

One student voiced dismay. “Is it one of those *chafa* school tours again?”

“Follow me, stay close, if you fall behind, you get left behind.” I took students out of the bungalow, across the asphalt, past the fountain, across the grass, up the steps, and into the main building. We continued down the hall until we came to a long, wide stairwell that leads to the

front of the building and into the quad in the middle of the school.

“Sit down on the steps near the handrails; it’s important for the story,” I told the students.

“We have to sit on the ground?” a student asked.

“It won’t kill you, I promise,” I replied.

After a few moans, students took their seats and I told them the story with passion and flourish, pacing up and down the stairwell:

In 1968, the Mexican American students of East Los Angeles realized that the schools in East LA—Garfield High, Wilson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt—were underserving their students. Going into the college track and on to college wasn’t encouraged, corporal punishment, swats, were used far too often, there were very few Mexican American teachers, students were punished for speaking Spanish, and their culture was under attack. A small group of students became angry and wanted to fight back. They wanted to protest, to show their anger. They formed a small group with representatives from all four campuses to organize a way to respond. All the students had been members of a youth program the previous summer and had met Lincoln High School history teacher Sal Castro. Castro convinced the students that they had to go through steps, do their homework first, think carefully, and then act.

The students put together a survey and took it to as many students as they could in the East LA high schools. They brought the results to the school board, hoping that they would listen and enact change. When they didn’t, the students decided to risk everything and walk out. The word about the walkout spread; it was set to begin the next morning. At 9 a.m. on March 3, 1968, students walked out of Lincoln and Wilson high schools. No one took them seriously at first, expecting that they would go quietly back to school, but they didn’t. The next day students again

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walked out of Lincoln and Wilson high schools, but that day, Garfield and Roosevelt joined them.

On the third day, students walked out again, only this time, Roosevelt students chose to stage a sit-in and they sat exactly where you are. They were sitting-in when the LA County Sheriff's Department and members of the LA Police Department burst in on them wearing helmets and riot gear. The police rushed the students and beat them with their batons.

My students had sat in absolute silence up until this part of the story, when they issued a few gasps. "No way!" several students whispered. And "Are you serious?"

I continued:

The police didn't ask the students to move. They considered them dangerous radicals and started swinging their nightsticks at them almost immediately. A few students attempted to hang on to the railings, but most broke immediately and ran up the steps

and in the opposite direction. The police chased them up the stairs, down the hall, and through the back door.

"Let's go!" I ushered students up, and we walked back down the hallway and out the back door.

"They just kept beating them?" a student asked. "The cops just kept attacking them, kept beating them?"

I continued the story:

Yes, once the violence started, it didn't end until the students were pushed against the fence, there was nowhere else for them to run. The beatings continued as the students attempted to resist. Eventually, some students were arrested.

My students stood in shocked silence, mouths open and angry.

For homework I asked students to record what they remembered from the story, to explain what the students were willing to risk to cause change, and to make an argument as to whether



George Rodriguez

Chicana/o student blowout, Roosevelt High School, 1968.

their decision was correct. I asked everyone to write at least two pages.

The next day I began class by asking: “Was their action justified? Was it worth getting beaten up and arrested for? Is it what you would have done?”

“Yes!” some students immediately shouted. Others weren’t sure: “If it was something more important, I mean, it was important, but to get beat like that.”

I then divided students into partner pairs to discuss their responses. After a few minutes, I asked: “So, what do we think? Did the students make the right choice?”

Comments ranged from “They absolutely did the right thing” to “What did it really accomplish?”

Most students were convinced that action should have been taken, but they weren’t convinced as a class what that action should be. Next, I showed the actual footage of what happened, as depicted in Part 4 of *Chicano!*: “Fighting for Political Power.” Immediately prior to showing the film clip, I asked students to record and reflect on at least five major events depicted in the film and to

record at least eight quotes from participants in the action.

The film footage is strong. It provoked reactions when students saw their school and when they witnessed the violence that took place. They were moved, more than I expected. For homework I asked students to reflect on the quotations they had chosen: “Write at least three sentences for each, explaining whether the film offers evidence that supports or challenges your thoughts about whether the students’ actions in 1968 were correct. The quotes and your responses will be the basis for a seminar discussion tomorrow.”

Did They Do the Right Thing?

When students arrived the next day, we again headed to the stairwell. Once there, I divided students into groups of four. Students sat around the stairwell, sharing quotes and their thoughts about them. The discussions began in whispered tones, but soon voices rose and students were pointing to areas of the stairwell where students sat-in in 1968 and where the police burst in.



Eduardo “Eddie” Lopez

Roosevelt students on the historic staircase.

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and honored.*

"Can we move around a little? We'll stay focused, we just want to look around some more," a student asked.

"Haven't you been in this stairwell a million times?" I asked.

"Yeah, but I just realized that I never really looked at it before."

After a few minutes, I asked each team to choose the most powerful quote or moment from the film to share and explain why they chose it. Each team shared in turns. Their responses were in hushed tones at first, reverential to the stairwell, which had seemed to grow into hallowed ground:

"It wasn't a quote so much or a specific thing, but the whole thing, that students were willing to risk everything for their education."

"The scene I keep thinking about is the one where the students are outside . . . up against the fence. I mean they had nowhere to run . . . and they were running away. I can't believe the police would do that to them. That's just fu . . . I mean messed up."

"We liked what Moctesuma Esparza said when he told the media, 'We the students have a message and we're asking you to convey it.' When the reporter tried to argue with him, he just walked away. It was like he was saying, 'That's our demand and we'll be here until it's fulfilled.'"

By the end of the class period, there was no resolution; instead, there was disagreement everywhere. About half thought the students did the right thing in 1968, about a fourth thought that the students did the right thing but were insane, and the final fourth were convinced that there must have been a better way. Their concluding homework assignment was to return to their

original writing about what they would be willing to do to fight for something that was important to them.

When the complaints arose—"Didn't we do this already?"—I explained, "It's to see whether you've changed your mind, to catch you growing."

The question "What would you be willing to do?" became the touchstone for the unit and for the rest of the year. Whether we were studying suffragist Alice Paul's hunger strike, Dr. King in the Birmingham Jail, *Johnny Got His Gun* author Dalton Trumbo's decision not to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, or the Berrigan brothers' decision to burn draft cards in Catonsville, Maryland, their choices always were compared with the choices of the high school students and the strength they showed in East Los Angeles. Difficult, distant, and powerful ideas became clearer and closer to home.

My students never again looked at the stairwell in quite the same way. When I'm lucky, I'll catch one of them explaining what happened to a friend or sibling. Whether they agreed with the protesters' choices or not, their school's stairwell has become a monument to be recognized and honored.

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