

**TRANSLATING COMMUNITY HISTORY**

**SOUTH EAST AUSTIN &  
MEXICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE**



The extended family of  
Johnny Limón, 2020.



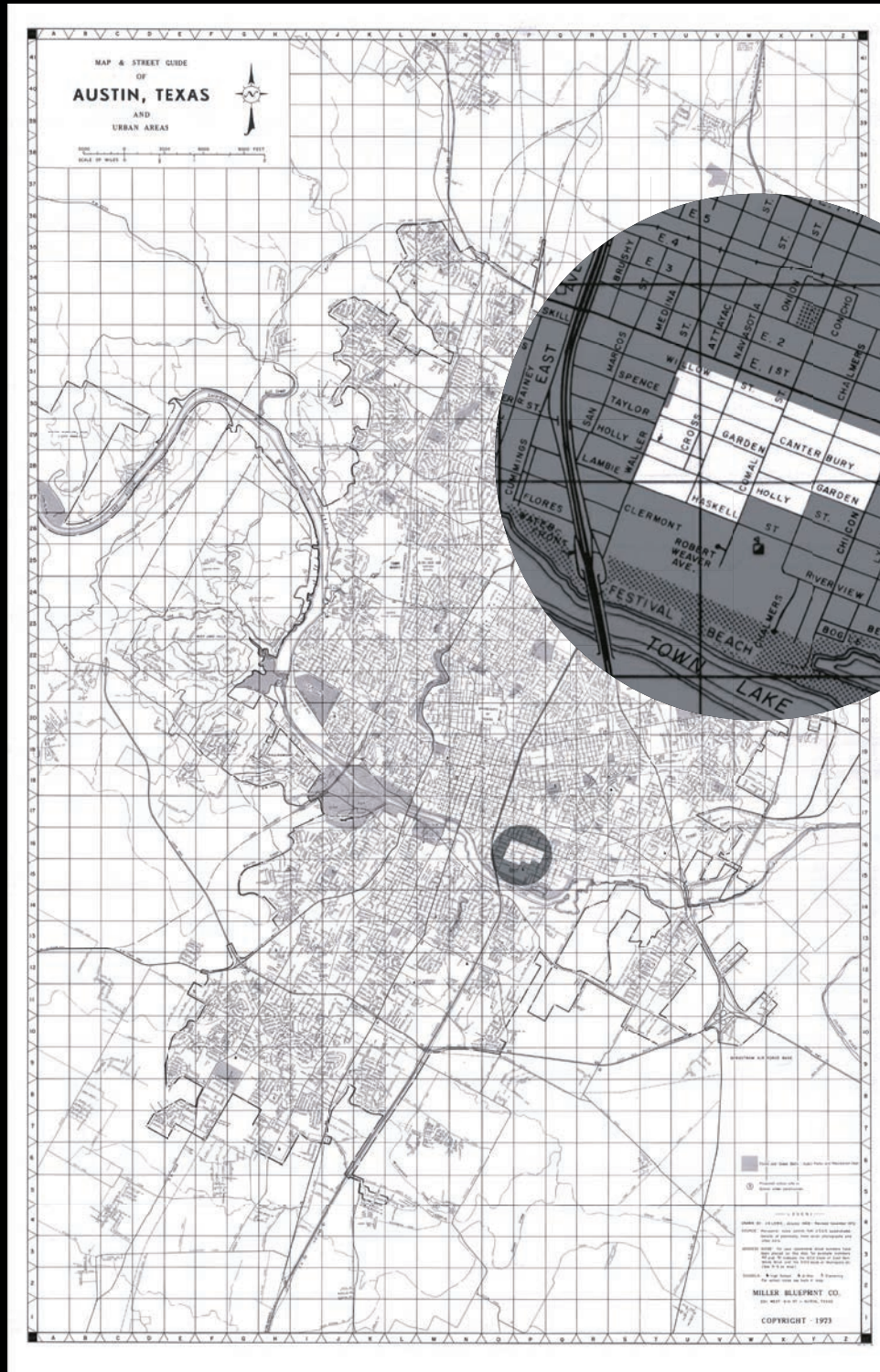
## THE PROJECT

Top left, former site of Casarez Grocery at 1305 Canterbury, 1980. Photograph by Texas Historical Commission, courtesy of George Washington Carver Museum.

Bottom left, Green and White Gro., undated. AR-1992-009-002 courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

The Translating Community History project uses creative archival practices to highlight the significance of East Austin neighborhoods. Open Chair and The Projecto, with support from the City of Austin Historic Preservation Office and the National Park Service, collaborated to create portraits and collect stories that celebrate the cultural and built heritage of these storied Black and Brown communities. Find more information at [austintexas.gov/departments/historic-preservation](http://austintexas.gov/departments/historic-preservation) and submit your story at [theopenchair.co](http://theopenchair.co).

## SOUTH EAST AUSTIN



Map of Austin. Map\_N-11-1973b, 1973. Courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Map © Miller Imaging & Digital Solutions.

The historical significance of the South East Austin area—bounded by Waller Street to the west, Chicon and Chalmers streets to the east, Willow Street to the north, and Haskell and Garden streets to the south—is more evident today than ever before. Residential subdivisions were platted in the area beginning in 1869, and commercial development soon followed along what is now E. Cesar Chavez Street, boosted by nearby rail and streetcar lines. At first, local residents and businesses were mostly Anglo and European immigrants, along with a few African American freedmen and Mexican immigrants.



Fiesta Gardens, undated.  
PICA-09333, courtesy  
of Austin History Center,  
Austin Public Library.

Then, in the early 1900s, many Mexican American families who had been living downtown in the “Old Mexico” neighborhood moved eastward as a result of rising racial discrimination and industrial development that displaced housing. They established Mexican American churches, schools, and businesses on the east side. Following the City Council’s adoption of Austin’s first master plan in 1928, the City constructed the Comal Street School (La Escuelita) for Mexi-

can American children, who were forced to leave previous schools. Later, Palm School took its place.

Race-based lending practices, racial covenants and deed restrictions, and widespread prejudice made it difficult for Mexican Americans and African Americans to purchase homes. Homeownership rates remained low until after World War II. Those lucky enough to own houses typically constructed piecemeal additions, since banks

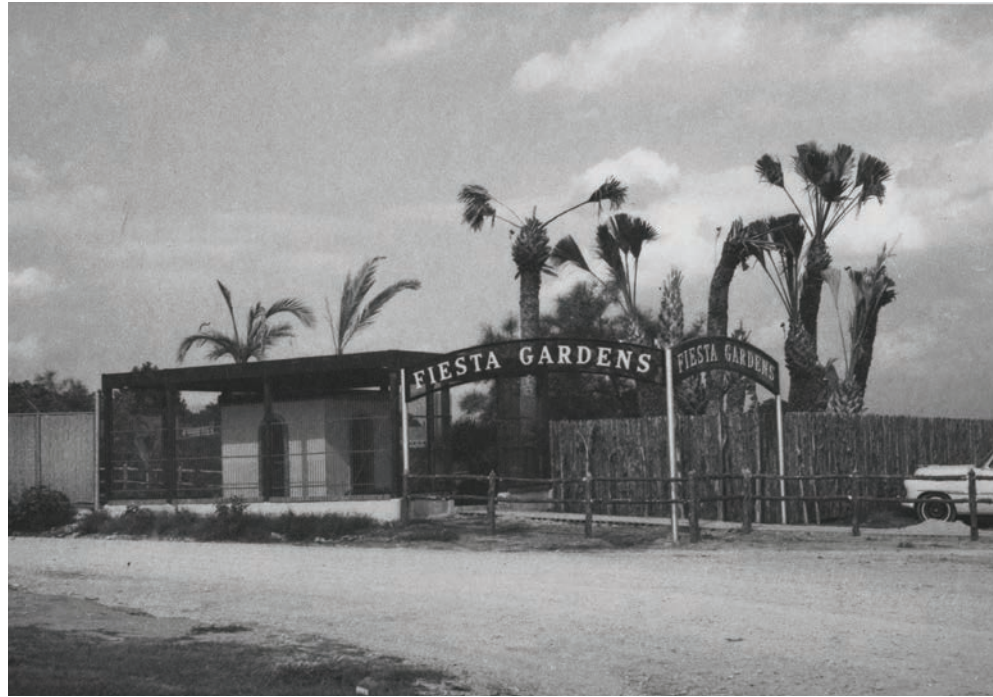
would not approve large loans for non-whites. Meanwhile, the municipal government ignored East Austin: some areas did not have paved streets, water and sewer services, or electricity into the 1950s.

The Mexican Americans who settled here made distinctive impacts despite these hardships. Entrepreneurship thrived, with many businesses operating out of owners’ homes. Since East Austin residents could not depend upon the City for public services, they looked to their neighbors for support. Non-governmental institutions grew stronger, from churches to political organizations to businesses. Organizations like the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and Ladies’ LULAC, the G.I. Forum, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and local civil rights chapters mobilized to combat political disenfranchisement and discrimination against Mexican Americans.

In 1958, the neighborhoods south of E. 7th Street were threatened with displacement when another City plan proposed “slum clearance” to create an industrial zone. Property values plummeted. Though housing remained, industrial use increased, including the Holly Street Power Plant. Meanwhile, the City expanded East Avenue into I-35, demolishing buildings and creating a physical barrier. The noise and pollution proved unbearable to residents, whose actions prompted environmental justice reforms. They joined communities of color across the nation, drawing on strong traditions of grassroots activism to demand change and laying the groundwork for preserving culture and

correcting inequities in municipal services in the coming decades. At the same time, lowered property values allowed many households a chance at homeownership. By 1952, property ownership in the focus area had passed the halfway mark, with many new residents of Mexican descent.

Since 2000, housing values have ballooned as Austin’s population and average income increase, again threatening to uproot the community and erase its heritage. By 2009, the percentage of Hispanic residents in the focus area’s census tract had dropped to pre-1959 levels. Equally vulnerable is East Austin’s cultural legacy, cultivated by resilient individuals and communities through trials, celebrations, and built heritage.



Fiesta Gardens, undated.  
PICA-21585, courtesy  
of Austin History Center,  
Austin Public Library.

Rosalinda Astran helps  
a small customer at  
her mother's business,  
Angie's Sno-Cones,  
located at 2020  
East 1st Street, 1981.  
Photo by Austin  
American-Statesman,  
courtesy of Austin  
History Center, Austin  
Public Library.

## JOHNNY LIMÓN



“You know—they say it takes a village. Whenever they say that it brings me back memories of our street. That’s the way they all were. Back then the community was that way, you know?”

Johnny Limón

Johnny Limón was a community leader who was involved with the Tejano Music Commission, Meals on Wheels, PODER, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Texas, and the Home Repair Coalition.



Community gathering at Zaragoza Park, undated. PICA-20323, courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.



Limón stands at his family home next to a street sign carrying his family's name, 2020.

“ In the Mexican American culture, some of the siblings will stay and live close to the parents. That was pretty much the way it was for our culture, and that’s what happened here on our street. My dad, four of his brothers, and two of his older nephews, when they moved into the city, they all bought houses

next to each other right on East Fifth between [what is now] Robert Martinez Street and Pedernales Street. So us kids, all of us grew up together. We didn’t have to go looking for other kids because there were so many of us. The original owners who built this house back in 1938 were the Fisher fami-

ly, and this area was called the Fisher Gardens. The street was called DonAnn. In 1986, the City honored our family by naming the street; we picked Calle Limón which means Limón Street. It was my brother that said, ‘let’s leave it Calle Limón.’

*Mr. Limón passed away on August 16, 2020 in the months following this interview. His nephew, Lonnie, and other family members gathered in their neighborhood to share more memories.*

”





Johnny Limón's nephew  
Lonnie Limón, 2020.



Lonnie Limón walking  
down his neighborhood  
street, 2020.

“ I don't think as a kid you really know. My cousin Alex before Johnny was real involved in the community. There were a couple of others that were real involved. My cousin John Treviño was the first Hispanic city councilman here. So they were doing stuff and we didn't know. We heard about them and you know kinda knew them from afar, but I couldn't tell you what they did at the time as a kid. It wasn't until probably high school or college that [I] realized just how involved. And you realize the impact they were making and you realize, 'Oh, wait a minute, I want to do some of that.' It starts to gel inside your

mind that you're part of something bigger than yourself. It also starts to gel that you're not just part of your family, but that your family is part of another family. Almost like a tribe. For instance, the Velasquez family [is] very well known because the elder, Roy Velasquez, owned Roy's Taxi, one of the first Hispanic-owned taxi companies in Austin in the 1930s. Well, he was friends with my grandpa, so then his sons were all friends with my dad's older brothers. So they have all this history and connections with each other that's kinda cool.

My grandpa, Johnny's dad, used to always tell his kids, 'Your friendships are more important than money.' That was something they all remembered and they all imparted upon their kids. So my cousins, all of them have at least 2 or 3 friends that I thought were my cousins growing up cause they were always around. But they were their friends from their neighborhoods and they brought them to Calle Limón so I just grew up thinking they were my cousins. And that's when I knew that friendships were really important.

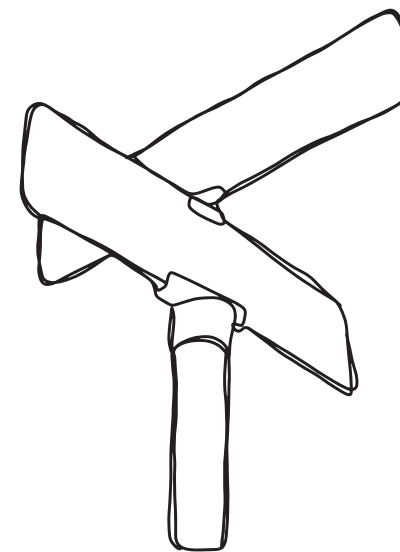
An organization that my uncle volunteered with was Meals on Wheels and he created a

coalition of home repair agencies called the Home Repair Coalition. [Meals on Wheels] was his partner in crime.

What's been beautiful and challenging at the same time is that everyone that's calling to give their condolences or [because] they want to do something, normally Uncle Johnny would take that on. Well now I'm responding to everybody and making sure that I don't leave anybody hanging. But he knew so many people that it's been a little hard to keep up. But it's cool though because you see the outpouring of love.

— Lonnie Limón

”



# MARY JANE THOMPSON



Lifelong East Austin resident Mary Jane Thompson pictured at her home, 2020.



Left and right, Mary Jane  
Thompson and family, 2020.



Confetti lingers on the street from a local graduation ceremony, 2020.

## PIO AND LORI RENTERIA



“I [Pio] grew up here in Austin, right off 11th Street. It was during the time when we were segregated.

Council Member Sabino “Pio” Renteria is a community activist and a resident and representative of Austin’s District 3. Lori Renteria is involved in a number of local civic efforts, including Tejano Trails and the sister cities program with Saltillo, Mexico.

Blacks could not go to the Paramount Theatre [or] the State Theatre. The only pool they could go to was Rosewood Park. 11th Street was the border between the low low-income Mexican Americans and the low low-income Black Americans. We all lived together. I had friends and they loved our tortillas and I loved their cornbread. We

used to trade—we used to get commodity food back then, we didn’t have food stamps. So because of where we lived, we would get cornmeal and my mom didn’t even know what to do with cornmeal. Sometimes the African American families got flour, so we traded it back and forth. So that’s the way I grew up.

”

## LEÓN HERNANDEZ



“There was a person named Roy Velasquez. He got this organization called LULAC and brought it to Austin, and through that org he was able to work with the City government and he was able to open the doors to us and other people...”

León Hernandez

León Hernandez was raised in Austin and was involved in community organizations like the Lions Club, LULAC, and Little League Baseball.



...so they could get hired by the City or the County or even the State. He was able to come back and did a lot for the community. I saw that back in the '60s and I followed him and joined that org back in '68.

I worked myself through the organization as president, vice president, treasurer, and district director. Then from there I got involved with the Lions Club, so I was able to get a lot more exposure into the community. Then I got involved with Little League. I was able to help a lot of kids that were coming up

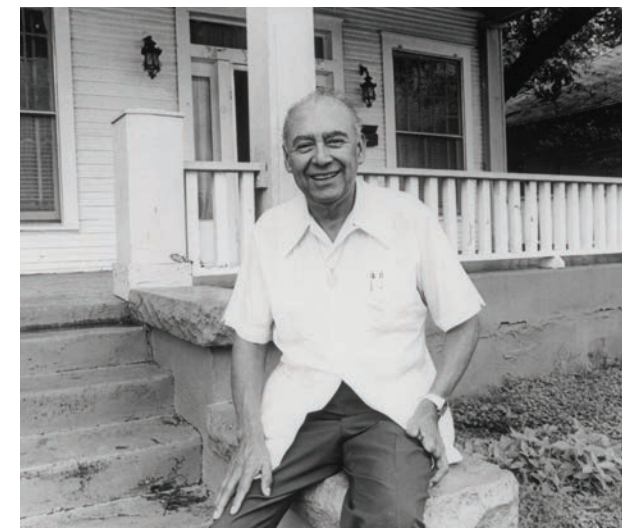
in the community. Most of them turned out good. That was my thing—I wanted to help a lot of people.

I've seen a lot of these kids grow. I see them, I talk to them. From time to time I run into them. They all appreciate that they were able to play organized baseball and they're thankful. "One kid asked me one time, 'What do you get out of doing this?'... I said, 'Well, it makes me feel good, and I'm hoping that when you grow up to be my age that you do the same thing.'"

”

Right, Roy Velasquez, founder of League of United Latin American Citizens, undated. PICB-21090b courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Left, León Hernandez pictured at his home near his garage, 2020.



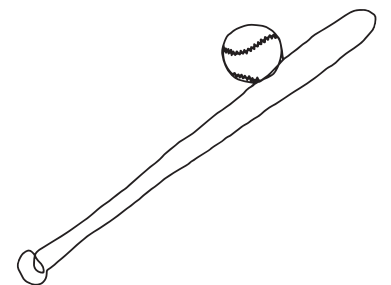




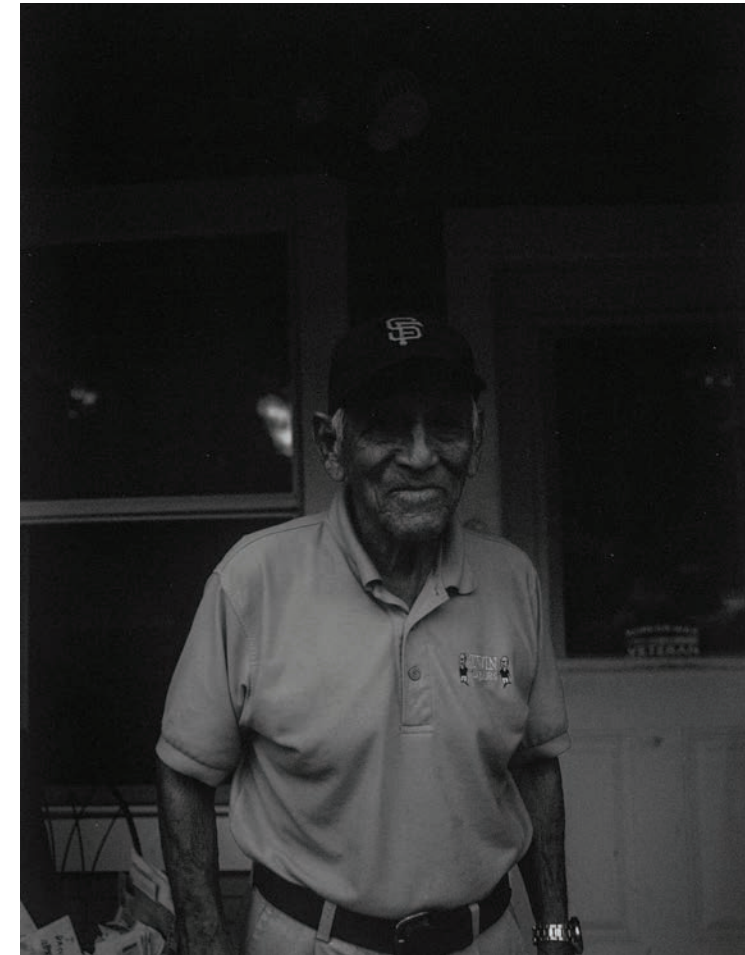
León Hernández  
pictured at his home  
near his garage, 2020.



Left and right, León  
Hernández with family in  
his East Austin driveway.



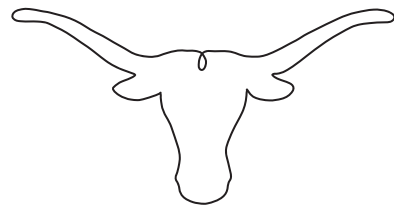
# LOUIS MURILLO



Born and raised in Austin, Louis Murillo is a Korean War veteran and a notable friend of University of Texas Athletics.

Louis Murillo's longstanding work with UT started at the age of 12 and developed into relationships with players and coaches throughout the years. Murillo was quoted in a 2014


Daily Texan article stating, "If you take good care of yourself, you'll be fine. I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't chase bad women, I chase good women. I'm just fine."



Louis Murillo in his East Austin home, 2020.



**MALDONADO'S**  
**record shop**  
LO NUEVO EN DISCOS MEXICANOS  
1114 EAST FIRST STREET  
PH. 472-0441



Newspaper ad for  
Maldonado's Record Shop,  
1970. First published in  
The Echo, Vol. 1, No. 1,  
March 3, 1970, courtesy  
of George Washington  
Carver Museum.

**BOTANICA LA FÉ DE CHANGÓ**



**Open from Monday to Saturday  
from 8:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M.  
resolvemos toda clase de problemas**  
**1623 Willow St.  
478-0167**

Newspaper ad for Botanica  
La Fé De Changó published  
in the Austin Light, November  
12, 1981. Courtesy of George  
Washington Carver Museum.

# BERTHA RENDÓN DELGADO



Bertha Rendón Delgado is an activist and granddaughter of the late Edward Rendón Sr.



“ This house has a long history, this neighborhood has a long history, but what really amazed me about this house was that when [my grandfather Edward Rendón Sr.] bought it, it was less than 800 square feet. My grandfather in the 1950s [and] ‘60s was very very ambitious. He wanted to do more than be a laborer or be part of a union; he had been doing that as a young boy. So he was looking at more of, ‘How am I going to make money for my family?’ So he created a business, and when he created that business, he created it out of this home. That’s why the home was such a historical home for us because the home was a very small house, then it became a huge house.

It was handmade by him, brick by brick—that was his hard work.

It was really devastating to see that [the house] did not win a historic landmark [designation]. So we had to watch it get demolished piece by piece. I was able to save the Comal store. I was able to save the Herrera House, but I couldn’t save my grandfather’s house. This home divided a family; it was in probate court for almost two years. There were nine children. Because of the greed and the fight, they think that the property is worth a lot of money. But at the end of the day—after you sell the property you pay the taxes and you pay the attorneys—you really go home with nothing. And you lose such a value and it’ll never be there again. That’s our story for the Rendon Casa because this house tore my family apart. And that’s happening a lot and hopefully those families come out and tell those stories.

Left, The Rendón house, 2020. Courtesy of Austin Historic Preservation Office.

Right, Students from Sanchez Elementary walking to the Terrazas Branch Library for storytime, 2001. Photo by School Library Journal, courtesy of George Washington Carver Museum.

“[My grandfather and his peers] became leaders because they began fighting for their communities, but they were just normal residents.”

Bertha Rendón Delgado



Left, East Town Lake Citizens and Brown Berets protest, August 1978. Courtesy of George Washington Carver Museum.

Right, East Town Lake Citizens and Brown Berets protest, August 1978. Courtesy of George Washington Carver Museum.





Raul Valdez and Bobby Chapa work on a mural for El Centro Chicano, 1976. Photo by Rolando Jimenez, courtesy of George Washington Carver Museum.

Before the 80's, the Brown Berets started to organize more in our neighborhood because of the issues happening and the injustice with police brutality, we had issues with AISD [Austin Independent School District], we had issues with social services. This area was just infested with drugs, gangs, and industrial plants. We continued to be surrounded by industrial pollution. Grandpa decided to go out with his elected officials and create some neighborhood plans. In that time there was so much segregation continuing to happen that he had a lot of setbacks. There weren't too many people that were supportive of these ideas the neighborhood was coming with. And because we were a Brown neighborhood, they weren't listening to us.

In order for us to symbolize that and identify it we have to do it with stories. We have to do it with murals, because art is what gives the message. And if we are not giving the message, we are not doing our job. I'm about giving the message.

So I'm really excited about all of the improvements we've done. These sidewalks were never here. That's what the neighborhood fought for. Nobody came and educated us, nobody came and said, 'Hey, this is prime land and this is gonna be prime land in 2015.' Nobody told us that you're gonna wake up one day and see all your houses gone. Nobody told us that you're gonna see nothing but different people in your neighborhood. We're a broken community right now. And it's just a small amount of us left holding on.

”





Sign notifies neighbors  
of upcoming  
demolition, 2020.

“I want people  
whenever they cross  
that 35 bridge to know  
that they’re walking  
on Chicano land.”

Bertha Rendón Delgado

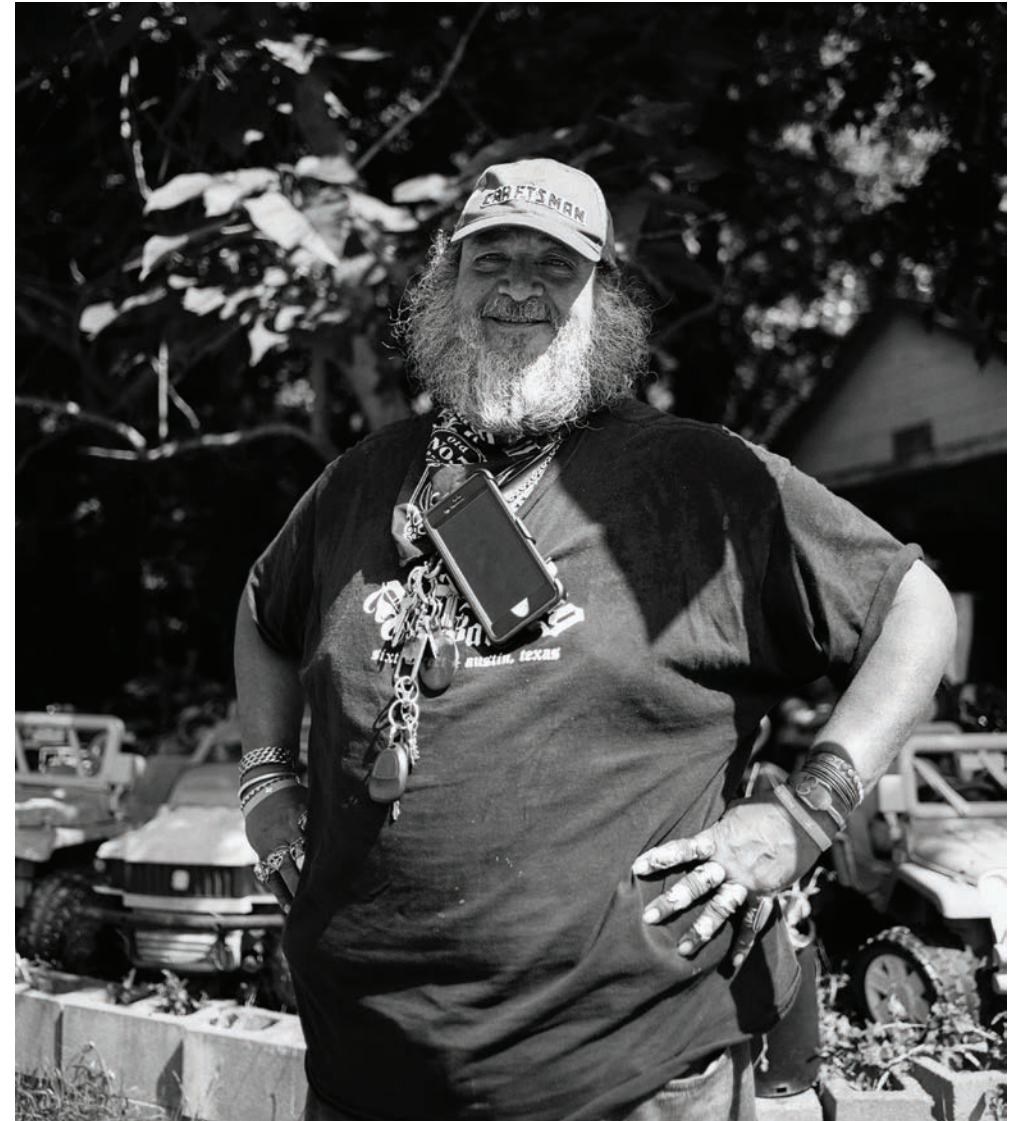


Mural by Chicano  
Lucha artist Ramon  
Maldonado, 2020.



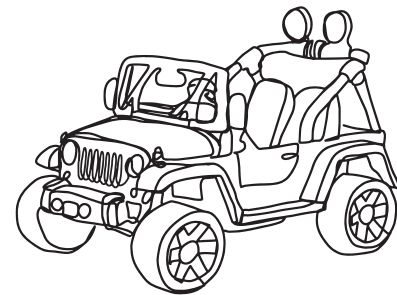
Left and right, Car show benefit for Austin Sunshine Camps at Festival Beach (Fiesta Gardens), 1981. Published in Low Rider Magazine, Vol. 4, No. 10, August 1981. Courtesy of George Washington Carver Museum.

# EDDIE "BEAR" LOPEZ



Eddie "Bear" Lopez is a longtime East Austin resident and a staff member of the *Austin American-Statesman*.

“I’m not sure that I’m an artist, but I like to collect, and I know what I see, and I know it’s antique. I like to see it; I like to look at it and admire it. I don’t like hiding stuff. You can see I don’t.”



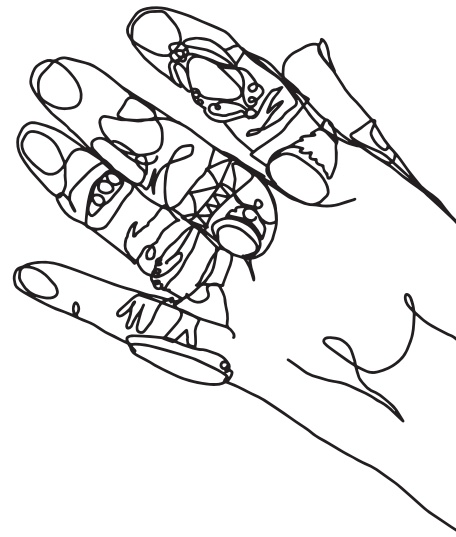
Eddie “Bear” Lopez



“ I’d say it was very good, bad, then very bad, then it became very nice, very expensive, nice. Here, a loved one passes away—grandma, dad, mom—kids take over; some of them can’t afford it so they have to sell. But once you sell you’re not coming back. It’s that simple. I’ve been here 61 years.

But we all gotta get together anyway, regardless. We have now that they can come over and we can go over. There’s no ‘you can’t come here.’ We’re stronger now, we’re all together. It’s everybody getting together now. Now it’s all mixed, it’s perfect. That’s the way they wanted a long time ago and now it’s happening.

”



Eddie "Bear" Lopez standing in his front yard in East Austin, 2020.

# RENEE LOPEZ



Renee Lopez grew up in the close-knit East Austin community. Her father formed one of the first mariachi groups in Austin, with Billy Mendoza: Mariachi Estrella. She still lives in her family home of over 60 years.

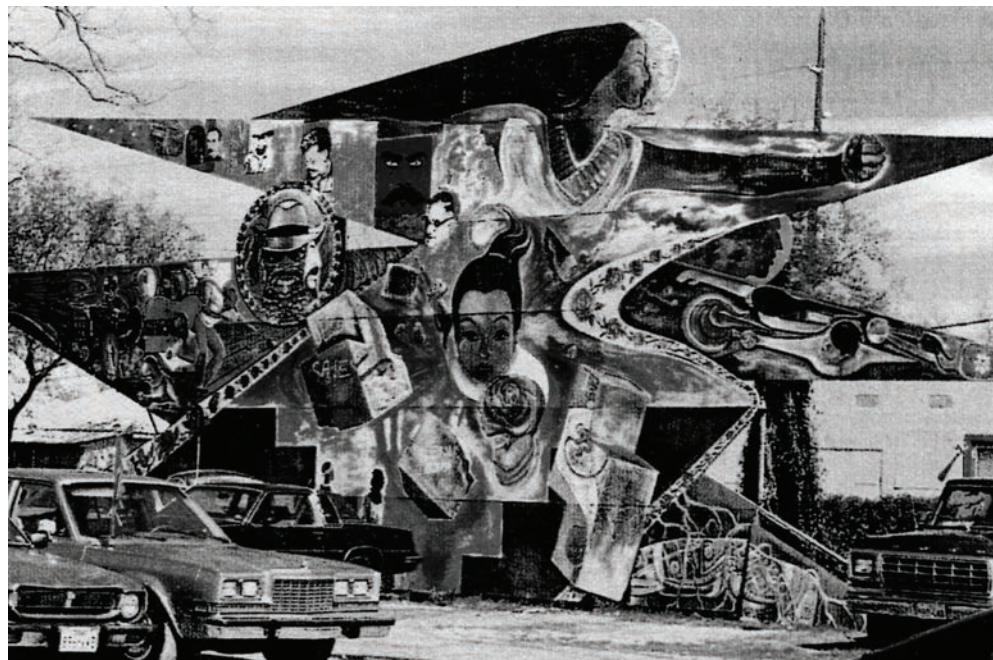




Our Lady of Guadalupe  
Catholic Church at 1206  
East 9th Street, undated.  
PICA-03290b, courtesy  
of Austin History Center,  
Austin Public Library.

“When I was growing up in the 60’s and 70’s it was mostly Hispanics. All these houses were really old, tiny little houses. A lot of people didn’t even want to be part of East Austin because of the danger that it was.”

Renee Lopez



But we also had a community that I really loved very much.

It's getting harder and harder [to keep the community feel] because a lot of the businesses that we went to are not there anymore.

It saddens us to see it going away and it's going away so fast. It's gotten to where it's unrecognizable in many ways. And sometimes it feels like you're holding on to it with both hands and it's just slipping away. That's real depressing for us as well.

We still try to go to some of the restaurants that are around; we still like to go to Joe's Bakery on Seventh Street. Even though everybody's scattered, we still go to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and we stay in touch with a lot of the people that live in the community still. A lot of the cultural things have gone so fast. You come home and it doesn't feel like home anymore. It's really sad because it was really an amazing community. Even with all its crime, it was a great community.

Then there's places like the MACC [Emma S. Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center]. I think that's done wonders for keeping the Hispanic culture going. I think that keeps a lot of people involved. I also think as a generation starts getting older and dying off that remembers the community, I think it's gonna be preserved unfortunately in books, magazines, websites, stuff like that because I don't know how much longer we can hold on to it. I think it's gonna undergo a big change.

For me it's community and family, because that's how I grew up—with a lot of family and the community and going to businesses that were run by Hispanic people and everybody knew everybody. My brother has my nieces come on [Zoom] and they love to hear stories about how my grandparents came from Mexico and what kind of work they did when they were here. And so I try to keep those stories going, so that's how we try to keep the community alive, even if it's just in pictures and memories now.

”

Top left, Ramon Ayala y Los Bravos del Norte sign autographs at Maldonado's Record Shop, 1971. AS-71-78519, Austin American-Statesman Photographic Morgue, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Bottom left, "Olin" by Raul Valdez on the 1500 block of East Cesar Chavez, undated. Photo by Oliver P. Franklin, courtesy of George Washington Carver Museum.



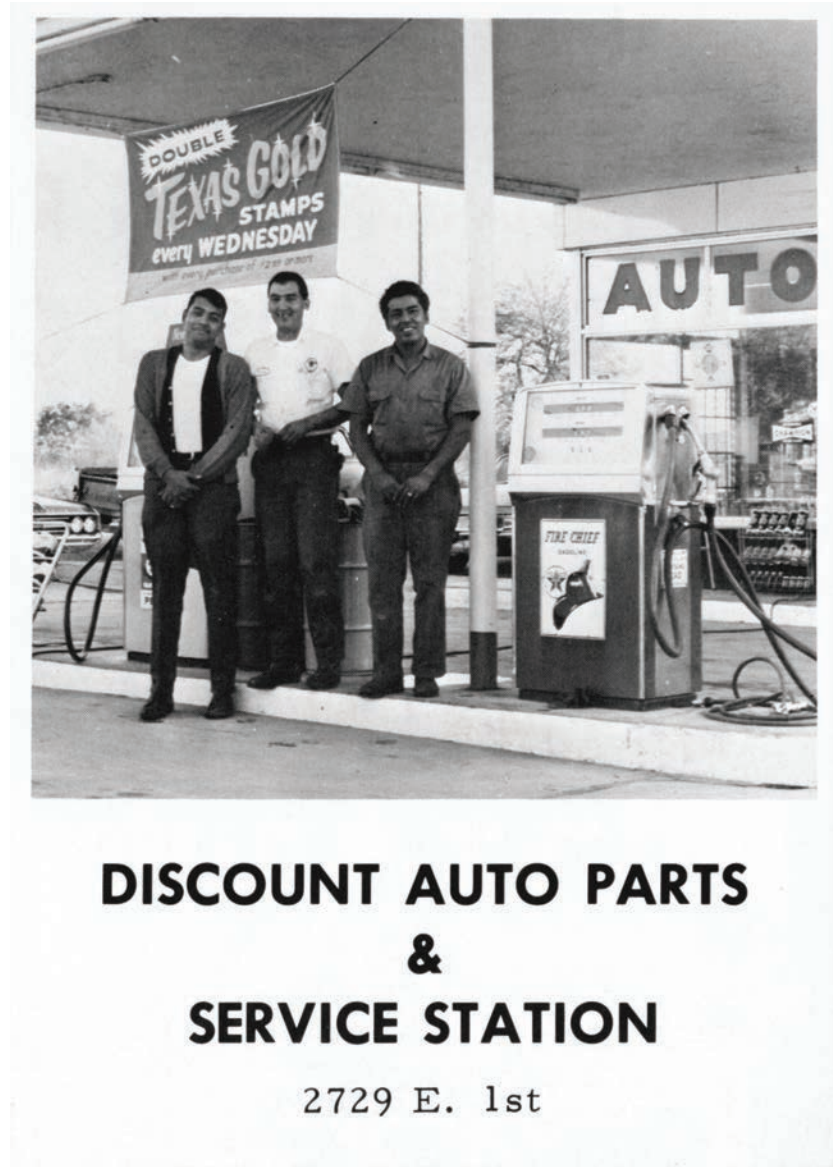
Above, Frias Grocery at Holly and Navasota streets, 1980. Photographed by the Texas Historical Commission, courtesy of George Washington Carver Museum.



Right, Poster for Fiesta del Barrio, 1979. Austin History Center, courtesy of George Washington Carver Museum.



Renee Lopez in front of her East Austin home, 2020.



Sponsor flyer from the  
1969 Johnston High  
School Yearbook. Courtesy  
of George Washington  
Carver Museum.

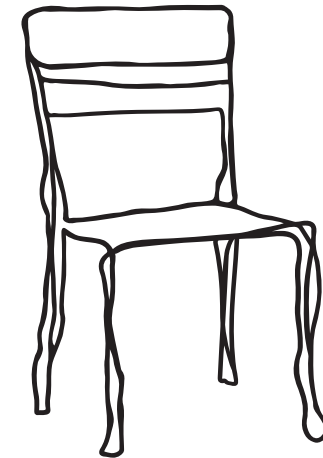


Yard sign in South East  
Austin, 2020.

“I try to keep those stories going. That’s how we try to keep the community alive, even if it’s just in pictures and memories now.”

Renee Lopez

## OPEN CHAIR: THE MISSION



Through community-centered open portrait studios and visual exhibitions, the Open Chair team uses various creative practices to intervene on narratives of (in)visibility that shape perceptions of Black and Brown communities in the American city. The resulting works illustrate the resoluteness of these communities and their impact in shaping the American city.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Aerial view of Austin.  
PICA-01314, Austin  
History Center, Austin  
Public Library.

This book captures only a fraction of the vibrant people who have inhabited and nurtured East Austin. Contact us to contribute your story to Open Chair.

**CONTACT:**  
theopenchair.co  
openchairatx@gmail.com  
(512) 956-5975



The Open Chair team,  
(from left to right),  
Tamar Price, Brittney  
Williams, Moyo Oyelola,  
and Chuka Agbaraji.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Open Chair team would particularly like to thank The Projecto and the City of Austin Historic Preservation Office staff for their time, support, and inspiration.

### PHOTO CREDIT:

Moyo Oyelola

### MADE WITH THE SUPPORT OF:

Illustrations by Akki Brathwaite

Additional Carver Museum photos sourced by Alan Garcia

Designed by Vanessa Saba + Christina Moser

Created by Open Chair + The People of Austin

First published 2020

ISBN 978-1-7363279-0-6

This material is based upon work assisted by a grant from the Historic Preservation Fund, National Park Service, Department of the Interior. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of the Interior.



