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Folklife Festival Narrative Session: Chico Garcia - Muralist and Graffiti Artist part 1

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WEBVTT

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<i>Speaker 1</i>: No Problem. Hello, uh, my name is Chico. I was born in Puerto Rico raised in the Lower East Side

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Where in Puerto Rico?

<i>Chico</i>: Maria

<i>Speaker 2</i>: Oh really?

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<i>Chico</i>: Yeah. And I been painting walls since 1978, basically. I been doing murals professionally since 1981. I've been traveling, I've been to London, Paris. I've been to Italy, Germany, Japan, and Holland Amsterdam.

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I've been practically all over Europe doing murals. One of the murals I did for in London for Picadilly Circus was for Jimi Hendrix.

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It was the 20th anniversary of his death so they hired me to do a memorial right in the heart of the city, which I did that, I think it was back in '89.

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And ever since I've been painting I, ya know, I've been noticing that the more I paint the more people relate to my work and they appreciate it and especially the kids, it's been. I've been reaching out to a lot of people, especially the kids. And I love that they respect my work as I go along.

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Ya know I feel like my art is in a way is is like a statement or so.

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Not political, but I feel like it's a statement regarding you know, peace and prosperity, and happiness and I speak all about that through my work. So, basically that's what I'm trying to do. What you see is that I've been working.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: How do you get started? Do you start it with just tagging or on trains or?

<i>Chico</i>: Ok, I started on trains actually I was one of the guys that was vandalizing New York City Transit.

<i>Speaker 2</i>: [[laughs]]

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<i>Speaker 1</i>: Of course when you're young and you come from a broken home, I got 3 sisters one that passed away, god bless her, you know. And I had 2 other brothers, there was 6 of us, you know your mom can't pay attention to all of us,

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so I was only crazy one day and had a bad day and did bad things like get into fights, get into gangs in the neighborhood, I was really going

down the drain, so when you're trying to go to school and you have kids picking on you and bother you,

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you know you want to protect yourself, so I got into martial arts and I tried to protect myself but next thing you know I roll into a gang and I'm running things in the neighborhood.

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well anyways, as things went by, days and nights went by, I developed a talent, I think I had it,

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I used to go home and get away from my problems by drawing on a piece of paper so I realized that man I could draw, I used to like that.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: You were never formally trained, it's not like you went to school?

<i>Speaker 1</i>: No I didn't go to school I used to look at magazines and I used to copy the stuff that was in magazines,

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I used to love cars [[BG noise]] so I started drawing that. Next thing you know I figured I could use the talent to buy you know dressing up the area, or before I even thought about the area I used to go to the subway to practice,

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that's where we all practiced. So I found Lee, if you remember Lee, [[crosstalk]] he's like number one graffiti artist, started with graffiti art. I would always say he's the king, you know, that's the king, not Andre Charles.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: And he's from what neighborhood?

<i>Chico</i>: He was from Smith.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Ok

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<i>Chico</i>: Now I think he's living in Brooklyn, he got married he has a beautiful daughter and he still got some work around the area, traveling.

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I don't know if you heard about about Stash, that's another kid that has a store right down the block over here, he has another one in Japan. That's another graffiti artist, I don't know if you know about Free Churro[[?]] [[crosstalk]] Lady Pink.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: I haven't actually asked you about [[?]].

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<i>Chico</i>: [[?]] I don't think you want to hear everything, but anyway.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: So someone like Lee Quiñones, is he kind of like your influence, like mentor you [[crosstalk]]

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<i>Chico</i>: I used to, I remember I was in the seventh grade, so I was going to Madison Prep, it was a remedial school for violent kids like me.

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(laughs) I used to always get into fights back in high school, it is a fact when Keith Haring was looking at my work and then he started and went from there.

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Before all that, he did high school 56 -- Lee Quiñones -- he did Donald duck and he was opening up an old bin and his name was coming out- Lee.

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And I was impressed, I was like wow I want to be like that guy. The school Madison prep they gave me a small world and I started doing paintings like aviation's about planes, the Wright brothers.

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So I remember the details and he came down because he heard about what I was doing and I had a chance to meet this guy.

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Now we call each other cousins. So he told me, 'look you have great talent but you have to continue to do it instead of doing graffiti in the subways trying to get into the art world. You have talent.' that's what he told me.

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And I was like really, really, you think so? I said should I practice still on the trains? He said "yeah, yeah, just don't get caught by the cops" So I started going to the subways made two lines double L,

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I remember back in those days five line, and I was typing in my name Chico and Silva you know and-

<i>Speaker 2</i>: Is Chico always like your nickname or [[crosstalk]]

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and so you used that as your tag.

<i>Chico</i>: Mama always called me Chico because in Puerto Rico there was a bow legged man and I always used to walk bow legged so they call me "Chico Chico!"

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So they, you know, I think it is a nice name, it says a lot for me, it has a lot of -- if you say power or whatever, for me Chico is more active.

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Antonio is more like down, Tony is short for it I can't deal with that, Chico is like woah, crazy I like that. (both laugh)

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So anyway, that was back then and then I started coming into the area and realized that mayor Kachi

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declared war on graffiti artists because all of the subways back then were getting defaced.

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So I started hitting the busses in New York every time they used to stop would write my name on the windows.

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Anyway, I used to get chased by the cops all the time, it was fun it was fun, I was young, a little slimmer I was able to run.

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Now forget about it I can't run two miles.

<i>Speaker 2</i>:

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Well, you mentioned at the beginning it was interesting, you know Henry Childson, he's done more of style wars and graffiti murals and artwork, he says everyone remembers at the beginning of hip hop breakdancing all this stuff was kind of like an alternative to gangs

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but he said he used to hang out with the breakdancers and they always had guns and there were always gangs, were there still like these like criminals? [[crosstalk]]

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<i>Chico</i>: I don't want to get into all of that, but now that you mention it, yeah. In fact that never came out of that film.

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Because he got everybody. He got some people. But uh, back in those days I remember if you go to layout, you're gonna definitely bump into a gang. You know the people from that area.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: A layout being?

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<i>Chico</i>: Layout meaning, uh, the trainyards.

<i>Speaker 2</i>: Okay.

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<i>Speaker 1</i>: So, if you go there, in the trainyards you have a gang from that park that belongs there - it's like me, this is my [[?]], you know, I [[?]] that was protected and look out for it, you know?

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So there was always protecting their trains, so let's say I come from Manhattan, there's Lee coming from Manhattan, let's say, somebody comes from Brooklyn, and we all go to the Bronx to try and take the layouts - the trainyards. so then the gangs go over there, you have a graffiti artist which is me, and Lee, and you have a graffiti criminal, which is the guys that like to vandalize.

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I mean graffiti criminal is guys that like to cross out your work and then you have graffiti vandals. Those are the guys that like to vandalize and write their names all over the place, they don't care what you think or what you doubt.. you know gangs [[?]].

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They like to write the gangs, or you know bad things on the wall, suck this or whatever, you know they want to put up their hair or I'm gonna kill you, you know bad things.

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And then you have the criminal that goes around and just cross out whatever they wrote, and that's where the gangs fights starts.

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We, we the artists try to fix all that, we try to do paintings for that, the bad [[?]] and bad things on the walls or on the trains.. we try to beautify the names and colors and try and make it look good, or fun to look at.

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But these guys come around and I think get jealous and they cross it out because they're criminals, you have the vandals they like, they wanna have their name up on it in case they take a picture of it, they wanna say I did it, so they put their name up on the painting or whatever, so they vandalize work.

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So those are three types of people you see, I mean back in those days underground you see those types of three people, graffiti artists, graffiti criminals, and the vandals.

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And you got to deal with the vandal and the criminal, and sometimes they have guns, and you know they [[?]] you up, bats and chains and they used jump you, take away your cans.

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{SPEAKER name= "Speaker 2"} So you have to, would you go to the yard in groups because..

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{SPEAKER name= "Chico"} Yeah we go in groups sometimes. But we had knives, and we had to protect ourselves.

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Basically when I was doing my painting there were guys protecting my back.

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And when there was coming of the cops, or the criminals, we had to run or stand there and fight. [00:10:

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09] "Chico their coming", wait up a second I'm almost finished.

<i>Speaker 2</i>: {{Laughter}}

<i>Chico</i>: I had to drop the cans sometimes, you know, use them as a weapon.

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You know its {{?}}.

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It was kind of risky, but like I said I was young.

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I was flexible, skinny , I was able to run so you know.

<i>Speaker 2</i>: So how old were you? You said you were in high school or?

<i>Chico</i>:

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Yeah, I was in high school, Junior high school, its ninth grade.

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I got into it almost first year of high school. And that is what you do, you wanna learn about girls and have fun and finding all that stuff. I was just finding out about the world I was just so blind about it.

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I was just, I was a {{?}}, I just wanted to be an artists and uh, I just wanted to get my name up on that wall on that train. That's what I was focusing on, the rest of it I didn't care, if I had to deal with a bunch of chump who wanted to whoop my ass cause I was painting my name.

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That's just what's apart of gradation day you know? {{Laughter}}

<i>Speaker 2</i>:

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Now you were saying, you go up to the Bronx and do stuff. Now but you were just talking earlier about the whole turf thing, this is your area and you don't except someone to, or you would let them come in after with permission to do stuff or that's just respectful or people just know that's

the respectful thing to do?

<i>Chico</i>:

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When I used to go up to the Bronx, which I had to go in I got a {{{}} group that's in the area, but they already got the bond where were like brothers and sisters over there. {{Laughter}}

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So there's no problem, they come on over here and over mine ya know cause that's them. But somebody else, like you know we got too many people crash you know, you know we got so many audiences, they've extremely ya know that's really proved themselves to do the right thing with their works, so I wouldn't accept not everybody to come here.

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You have to show me quality of your work, like your really an artist like your really serious about yourself. You can mind just putting your name up there, or anything that doesn't have any meaning.

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People when they see that, kids when they see that, it's just a wall, and it's a bad name for other graffiti artists. We try to protect our background. {{{}}

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When I used to go in the Bronx, I used to do the subways, so it's a big difference(between) subways and walls. You see, "this is my territory", so the {?}. They have um {?}, they have some other kid.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: {?}

<i>Chico</i>: Yeah, {?}, that's his area. So we know where everybody's at. In Queens we have uh, what's his name - Sean, [[?]] tattooing and all of that. So everybody has his own new area, so if it's like, if you go to Brooklyn you'll have this other kid called uh, forgot his name but, uh, he runs that area in Brooklyn and [[?]].

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So, uh, I'm basically down here, you know, I mean there's like 3 or 4 artists here in this area but they're not as well-known as I am. Because they used to just do, I'd say books, just paint books, maybe one wall and just put their name, it wasn't really art, you know, so they wasn't really doing as good as they should have been.

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I think I took control of this area because of the fact that the area was full of graffiti, and there was so much things on the wall, made the scary look so scary. If you notice that right there, the picture over there: the way it used to look.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Oh, just all of the graffiti {?}.

<i>Chico</i>:

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Yeah so, wanted to get rid of that, I managed to [?]. [[laughter]] [?] disgusting in the background. You know, I don't find that amazing at all.

<i>Speaker 2</i>:

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All the trains, see the old pictures of the inside of the train [crosstalk] and they're all like that, and it's like all the walls are just like, even worse than that actually.

<i>Chico</i>:

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Yeah, you know and if you read some of those things they got slangs that talk about bad, you know like gangs, things up on the walls, you know...the bad part, you could tell.

<i>Speaker 2</i>:

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Now, then you start getting into the memorial wall [?] the 80's that started really getting - it was the 80's, the 80's...

<i>Chico</i>:

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From the subways back when, I remember uhh... this guy [?] was a graffiti artist. Cach(?), I remember him. Uhh, anyway, he painted the trains white, so he said: "Wow, [?]". I try to go out there and you know get one train done, but I think I did have a train - the white train with my name Chico, and the next day I went by to see - back to the trains [?]. That pissed me off [?], I wasted my paint and my energy.

<i>Speaker 2</i>:

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Well you don't expect it for [?] the train to last. It - it's kind of like uh...[crosstalk]

<i>Chico</i>:

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It's like a message for one-

<i>Speaker 2</i>: It's not gonna last a long time.

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<i>Chico</i>: No, it's not gonna last, it's like a message for one area to the next.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: M-hmm. [Affirmative]

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<i>Chico</i>: You know, you put: "Chico was here, what's up, Brooklyn" you know, type of message. That type of message because it goes around, you know the whole city and people will read it, and they'll see it and they'll wonder who's this kid Chico.

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And you know, that was the whole idea [?], beautifying the trains but anyway...but I expected to see it the next day, but I didn't see it. I was there for about 2 hours waiting [?], and I counted about 10 trains: mine never went by, forget about it, so umm I was pretty upset. So, I was with a camera because we used to do that. [?] we got 15, 20 [?] so we knew that already. [laughter]

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We had keys to get inside [?]. [laughter] So anyway,[?] [laughter].

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So uh, anyways back in those days, when he declared war we decided - well I [?] I don't want to get shot or killed in a [?],so I started looking at my neighborhood: the way the neighborhood was full of graffiti, top to bottom [?].

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Graffiti became really extremely something serious in the city, I mean people hated it. It was all over, all over , all over I mean, even cars were getting tagged up.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: M-hmm. [Affirmative]

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<i>Chico</i>: You know, people's personal properties, I mean there was the boom, I don't know the- the spread, it was like something incredible, I mean.

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So I came back and I noticed my neighborhood was really bad, I mean not just my neighborhood: Westside, Uptown, all over. Graffiti was really blowing up. Like I said, the year 2000 it's gonna be graffiti on the wall, more graffiti on the walls than people wearing a three piece suit. [laughter] Which is true, it's happening now. [?]

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Uh-huh, and [?] tagging [crosstalk]

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<i>Chico</i>: Yeah, tagging. That's called [?] graffiti vandals.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: M-hmm. [affirmative]

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<i>Chico</i>: Those are the guys that give us a bad name. You know, the more graffiti, we hate graffiti artists - not artist, the vandals because they're vandalizing the city. [?]. [Laughter]

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But anyway. So uh, I remember in - I had a young girl that uh passed away.

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First, before she passed away, I used to go hang out watching the skate park a lot, that was my hangout [?] [laughter].

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Why? Just..

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<i>Chico</i>: It was fun, you know, to hang out with different groups, ethnic groups, you know, and backgrounds and all that you know so...you know that was like, my family was my friends, because my brothers and sisters that always home and I had to go out there, I was the [?] had to see the world, you know.

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So uh, I had to explore to... I got into drinking and all that, I got into gangs so, that was my hangout [?] skate park.

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[?] Cach had a boyfriend over there, you know, so he was playing music very loud, and he decided to close the park down and get us arrested and everything, and that's what happened. So, then I didn't go to the park, I remember I was bringing a girl down [[?]] down to this area [?] and she was: "I'm not walking down there, look at all of that graffiti on the wall. Oh no, they got prostitution, drugs, hell no, take me back!" [laughter]

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And I had to bring her right back to the park. [?], I was pissed off too. [laughter] [?] you know? Anyway, I said when I started walking back, I started noticing: "Damn, that girl didn't want to come back [?]", and I said "Damn, I got to do something about this. Let me try to uh...beautify my neighborhood, let me try to do something so when I bring the girl [?]."

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Anyway, umm...I remember clearly that uh, that's what I decided to do, I decided [?] I used to work for New York City Housing. In fact first for, uh, New York City [?] Department, uh they hired me to [?] pool.

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Uh, then, I started doing a couple of, uh, [[?]] back in Brooklyn, Queens, areas like that. You know, I wasn't that good as artist but they were using me for summer things, like a summer program: painting, you know, some of the parks in the city.

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I was with them for about 3 or 4 years, then I got involved with the New York City Housing Authority down by uh [?] and from 6th St to 12th St.

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Being that I was living there, I figured you know I wanted a permanent job, you know and they had a new manager his name is Mr. Russo. So he was trying to clean the graffiti off the Projects, and that wasn't going to happen.

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[?] "Hold on a second, my name is all over the Projects". So I noticed this man came out of his way and started cleaning it up and he said "If any graffiti artists or graffiti I'm gonna find, [?] Projects - blah blah blah." So my mother knew I was a graffiti artist, my mom said "You can't be doing this, I'm telling you. You're gonna get us thrown out the Projects, blah blah blah, I said "[[?]] please." you know what I'm saying? [[?]] You know, back in the day I told my mom "Please, mom, I don't wanna hear that."

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So Mr. Russo - I said [[I'm going have to target?]] his manager: it was a [?], today's going very good. In fact, he was going to hire me again to work with some kids he was telling me the other day.

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So uh, his door, you know he couldn't [?], so I always put "Chico" on his door. The manager [?] you know, every time - "Who is this Chico guy?" you know? So he put uh, he sent the cops after me and everything, they couldn't find me.

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Every night he used to leave, every night I used to put my name on that door, "Chico", "Chico was here", or "Chico ain't stopping." [laughter]

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I had the manager really tight, the reason I did that because I wanted a job. I tried to do it in a nice way and he didn't want to hire me, so I figured I'd do it the bad way. You know what I'm saying? I had to get this man's attention one way or another, so I tried [?] all this, this is my work.

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But then you know, I didn't tell him that I was Chico, I was just "This is my work, I'm an artist living up in the Projects." "Oh no, we're not hiring." and I said "Yeah but I [[can help you with?]] the problem, to fight uh, the war against graffiti. I'm helping because I know about that stuff.", I didn't tell him who I was. So he didn't want to hire me, so I said "Alright, thank you.", right? Tonight you're gonna have your door painted again. Oh yeah so, in the evening I came by [?] I put my name Chico on the door again.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: [?] to watch the door - security or something?

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<i>Chico</i>: Yeah, well, he had, I know he had - I'm sure he had security and, but you see I was pretty smart, I used to studied - I live in the neighborhood so, I knew I wasn't going to stay out after 12. Forget about it, not in my neighborhood.

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<i>Chico</i>: So uh, he couldn't really get to me. I mean the city won't pay security after 6 o'clock, you know that's it. After 6 the main guy goes home, and then the people upstairs [?] so.

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I just, I said "I know I don't have to go to school the next day but 11 o'clock [?], I'd go outside, I'd take spray can in black, and I'd put my name on his door." Finally, somebody in my building ratted at me: " Oh that guy lived downstairs. Yeah, Chico guy downstairs."

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Oh, that old lady, I almost killed that lady. [laughter] Yeah, cops came to my house and everything, and they stole my work.

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"You know something?" said the manager, he says "You know something? You're a great artist, you should be working for us." I said "Yeah, I tried." you know [?] I don't think he wanted for me to - but he said [?]. "You're the guy that's been tagging up the door?" You know, I tried to get his attention because I wanted to work in the neighborhood. I think I could work with his kids and beautify, and I'm sure they'd respect me because they see me working on the area. [?] blah blah blah blah.

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So the guy says "Okay, yeah just come tomorrow morning, bring your work, we're not going to arrest you. We don't want to give your mother a [?] to come tomorrow." and speak to the manager and see what happens. The next day, he said "You're the guy Chico, uh?" I said "Yes, sir. I came here for a job. You didn't want to give me a job. I was trying to be nice." You know, you know, what did you expect from a young guy like me, you know?

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: But you did get the job? [crosstalk]

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<i>Chico</i>: I got the job for about 8 - what was that, I think about it was about 6 years.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Wow.

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<i>Chico</i>: Then I started traveling around the - you know, I was working for New York City Housing. On weekends I was painting the area, beautifying: "Crack kills", "Drugs kills" for the areas. I used to take some of the buildings that was abandoned because I wanted to get rid of the - you know, the drugs and prostitution in the area, and all of the graffiti stuff. So I was doing paintings against all that.

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So with the money I was making from the housing I used to buy my spray paint whenever they sold it. I used to steal it though but then, but then after a while I started buying it. And I'm still buying it right here from [?], I've been buying from them about 15 years. [Laughter]

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But they know me, they're like "[?] gift." Sometimes, sometimes, they get me [?] for Christmas and stuff like that, [?] clientele. [Laughter] Bring a good preem, you know?

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So anyway, then I started beautifying the neighborhood and people started to hire me: local [?] gigs, around town, storefronts and stuff like that. And today that's what I'm doing for a living. I left my job in the housing authority and - and I make a living by painting [?].

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: You said that you - just that's what you do for a living? [crosstalk] But, now you get back a little bit [crosstalk] memorial walls. Is that- at one point they're really big, there's a lot of them - [crosstalk] - just doing them all the time at one point?

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<i>Chico</i>: Yeah, the memorial walls. Uh, the memorial walls is like, the reason I started doing it in fact, there was a young girl that brutally raped.

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Her name was uh...what was her name? It's on the tip of my tongue. Uh it's hard to remember. Anyway, there was a young girl that got brutally raped in [?], [?]. I forget that, because I'm getting old. So uh, [?] she was a model, a beautiful girl, you know? It was like, you think of Jennifer Lopez, [[?]] and everybody was like "she's beautiful", you know, "everybody wanna protect this girl." So everybody used to, you know, protect this girl, because she was the most gorgeous girl [?].

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And she was 18 years old, she wanted to be a model, so she was [?]. She was working at the mall in, uh, Brooklyn. Uh, there was this security guard, I mean the guy just got out of jail, they hired him as a security - you know - guard, and he started to like the girl so he started to harass the girl.

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And so, and when she used to come back from her job she used to tell her mom: "Mom,[?] go there because this guy is always harassing me." Blah blah blah. So her mom said: "I want you to go there and leave the job, forget about it." You know umm...I remember that I heard from the story she went to leave, get her last check and the guy took her and raped her and [?] he did everything to her. And he killed her - so.

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So, two days before that she - I was doing the supermarket around the corner on 6th St. So she came up to me and she says: "Chico, I want you to [?] you know, my room. [?] not gonna see [?]." It was that she knew that [?] or something, I don't know.

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So two days after that, I found out that she got killed, I uh - I was surprised about that. [?] girl was beautiful, you know, and gorgeous, and attractive. [?], [?] she passed on and just got raped and everything. So that kind of made me feel really bad, so I did a memorial for her.

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That was the first memorial, I think before Michael [?]. Because I did Michael [?] first because I remember the cops, he was a graffiti artist as a [?]. I don't know if you remember that story. Alright, if you go back into history you'll see uh - so the second memorial [?], but the second one was for that girl, it was 1988.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: [?] did that on your own, the family didn't hire you or anything?

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<i>Chico</i>: No, no, the family did hire me.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Oh, okay

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<i>Chico</i>: I went up to them and asked them if he was okay, because you know, she wanted clouds. You know, so I wanted to at least give something to that girl like -

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Mh-mm. [Affirmative]

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<i>Chico</i>: So that was the first memorial - I mean, all over like the city, the first one, that was like the first one.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: You think that was like - so that was like the start?

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<i>Chico</i>: Yeah, that was the start. I started that whole memorial scene, which I'm proud of that. [laughter]

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Do you think there's something - I mean if you read about the memorial walls a lot of people say "Latinos started this" because there's this tradition, I mean I've seen in Puerto Rico where they have the crosses on the side of the road, and there was this tradition to pray to the people who died. [[crosstalk]]

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Are you conscious of that? [[crosstalk]] Yeah, are you conscious of that?

<i>Chico</i>: Not really.

<i>Speaker 2</i>: You know, when you - when you started this tradition being Puerto Rican "Okay, I know this is there, I'm gonna like-"
[crosstalk]

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<i>Chico</i>: I wasn't conscious and all that, believe me. I don't know I guess it's in the blood.

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But uh I knew never about that stuff like uh, I mean I've heard about [?]. When he put it on the film, that he was talking about that I didn't even know, I said "Wow" [?] you know what I mean? It's like - it's incredible.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Mh-mm. [Affirmative]

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<i>Chico</i>: So they marked the place where the person dies, where they put flowers but I started doing a painting now, to bring back the spirit.

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Which I - I don't why, I have no idea why that got into my head, but I was wondering since I didn't want no graffiti paintings nowhere, let me do something nice: something different for a change, maybe they might like that.

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And so uh, that was the first memorial - I mean after Michael Stuart, that I did, it wasn't such a big thing Michael Stuart, because, you know it was - the neighborhood was full of graffiti, people didn't care about stuff like that.

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But they heard about this girl and they knew about this girl, that was a big memorial that I did. It was right there in Avenue [?] between 4th and 5th Street on an abandoned building. And I did a memory of [?], I put flowers, roses out and I put angels, and then people started bringing candles, it was incredible.

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The families started bringing candles like [?] and started praying there, crying, and I was like "Wow, whoa, wow", and I felt like everybody started crying, there was like thousands of people there.

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News Channel 47 was there, 41. The family was really really, I mean...destroyed over this lost. So uhm - I mean even me, I started crying - she was a beautiful girl [?] she was like "Yo, you're my man." [laughter]

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So uh, yeah, right now she's in Heaven [?] by the fact she probably looking at me.

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So uh, that was the first memorial. After that one...uh, someone else passed away and they called me to do another memorial. Then I remember there was a gang war and drugs, they started killing people in the neighborhood, and I did like 4, 5, 6 memorials after that.

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And then somebody came down to my neighborhood from Brooklyn and they noticed that memorial and they hired somebody over there to do it.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: They say - I've read also that - a lot of people think drug dealers start - kind of - were very big in starting this tradition because they had the money to pay for it all.

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<i>Chico</i>: Yeah well, it was drug dealings, it was more like they was killing drug dealers. Let me tell you. I started with that young girl first, and then two little girls that the building collapsed right on top of them right by 13th Street [?].

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Oh yeah okay, I've seen the news.

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<i>Chico</i>: Okay that came out in the Washington [?], it was like the book that [?]. Of uh life in the city or something, so I have that book at my house anyway.

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Uh so after that, drug dealers started to hire me. "Oh listen, my man got killed. Can you-" so you know it was like starving artist so I made a business out of this, you know? People getting killed, making money, why not?

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And uh back in those days, like the 90's: 91' , 92' 93', 94', 95', 96', 97': It was all memorials, it was all the years for memorials.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Okay, so from the 80's to the 90's to the - now it seemed like it died down a little bit.

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<i>Chico</i>: Yeah, slowed down.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Why do you think?

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<i>Chico</i>: Well it's still going on in the Bronx because [?] memorials. You see they [?] memorials. So uh in fact I was suppose to do- there was this young kid who came up to me and says that uh a garbage truck just went over his buddy on a motorcycle.

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[?] or something like that, he's suppose to call me. So he wants me to do a memorial. His mother's dying, he's been looking for me.

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And believe me, I stopped doing memorials. The reason because uh it's sad number one. Nobody wants to see dead people all over the walls in the city, everywhere you go it's the dead. Every corner you see. The neighborhood becomes sad, it becomes...like um, what you say - like uh - what - with the burials

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Oh like a cemetery.

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<i>Chico</i>: Yeah, cemetery kind of - you know, when you really start placing the death, I mean the dead people, like, it doesn't you know you don't want to go party or even walk through there, you feel the spirits watching you, you know what I'm saying?

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I don't know if you believe in that stuff, that's how I felt when I was doing the paintings down here, and believe me I had a memorial in each

corner. [?]

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: You know something interesting I wanted to ask you, because you did the Diana(?) one and the other Diana one and actually by my house in the Bronx I um, right in the corner. I remember when she died: flowers, [?], taped photos you know, all the people left outside the [?].

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And it's like: why do you think - and it's really interest in mostly like the Latino communities: why do you think there's um Diana held this like... people - what did Latino people have in common with Princess Diana that they felt for her and like, felt so bad like when she died?

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<i>Chico</i>: Well Diana was uh a beautiful woman, I mean um that's one. She was uh...working for the poor, you know?

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She helped out the poor, she gave a lot of money for the poor people. She wasn't a uh queen that was like soup up: she was down-to-earth.

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You know, she would walk the city of [?] and walk with the people trying to take the bombs off the - she was doing the right thing.

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Uh, with Mother Teresa, they got together and she gave money to - you know what I'm saying?

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I think she was - she also had personal problems, you know she was [?] younger [?]. They said she was a prostitute and, she's been through a lot. So usually, the Hispanic people, they kind of been through all of that too, you know?

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I mean, we haven't gave the poor any money because we're not rich, but we've been through where people have slapped us around, and have never gave us a chance to really express ourselves.

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So uh, I think that's what I think we have in common, that she was trying impress herself and she did it when she became a queen or whatever she was. She started giving back to the world, money for the poor but when she was dead, the issue was, you know, she knew what it was to be poor and be slapped around.

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And they used to say that she was a prostitute and all that, they really put her down.

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And I think they killed her - that's one of the reasons they killed her because she was, uh, Diana was from one place, and she was trying to marry someone else from another place, whatever it was.

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So the English people got pissed off or whatever and they didn't want that to happen so...what I think is - she was a great woman and she was down-to-earth, really, and she's been through a lot, she's been through so much, and I think that's - a lot of people, you know saw her history and really felt bad about this woman, she went through life [?], and she gave back, she followed - she went everywhere.

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She visited all the poor people and she knew the problem, she actually knew that - she felt them. You know, that's the good thing about her. That's what I think really touched a lot of Hispanic communities.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Yeah, I was so surprised [?] she died, there was so much you know, [crosstalk] people putting you know, wanting to do memorials and remembering her and commemorating her.

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<i>Chico</i>: Yeah because I think she was very special, she touched a lot of people's hearts. I mean as for a woman, she touched my heart, she was doing the right thing.

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I know some rich people like Donald Trump, you know what I'm saying, they rather go party with their money, they ain't even going to - there's people dying, kids who need places - and they don't want to - and the city could take some of these kids right now, they're over there smoking weed, they could take them and give them something to do.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Mh-hmm.

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<i>Chico</i>: I mean even me [?] take these kids, you know I'd go down to the Bronx and [?]. Some of these [?] out here, when they go down [?] see all of this graffiti, how about taking some of these kids, and dressing up the gates, and having somebody behind them that would be able to work with them.

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And you know, but uh I mean every [?] that come up there they wanna talk so much, they wanna fix and fix and fix, but if you notice I'm doing the fixing and they're not even providing money or anything like that.

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You know, I'm dressing up the area, I'm making it look like an art gallery, we don't have anymore art galleries down here.

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So I'm trying to make my neighborhood look like an art gallery. I mean you have all these tourists that come down here, they enjoy my work.

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They enjoy walking around and seeing paintings, different things on the wall. I mean, they don't wanna see a plain wall full of graffiti.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: What is that, like a gray concrete wall or something? [crosstalk]

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<i>Chico</i>: Yeah, yeah, a grey wall or blue or green, what was people thinking of, you know what I mean? I want to put a little color in their lives. When they go out there waiting for alcohol, "there's where I bought it", you know their drink, they wanna see a little color, you know, in their evening. "Oh look at this [?], look at this it's great. Charlie check it out, we can take a picture there with your girlfriend or whatever, or your boyfriend" [laughter] It's the year 2000, you know what I'm saying?

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: So, but now you're saying you don't do memorial walls for different reasons, most of the stuff now is commercial enterprises that you do, like for companies, businesses -

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<i>Chico</i>: Yeah, basically that's what I do now. You know, there's a lot of people that [?] [laughter] Like I always say: the cake is no good without the cream.

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You know, I don't make as much but it's enough for me to pay my bills and I'm not saying I'm rich because I'm not, but people say "Chico, by now you should be rich." but living here in the city is impossible. [crosstalk]

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So rarely I can even survive, I can't even have enough for my own dinner sometimes, but I do it because I enjoy work, I don't wanna be too rich or be too poor, I wanna stay in the middle where I'm at right now.

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Being able to pay for my bills and being able to survive, trying to make the place, my neighborhood a better place, which is getting there. You know, it's getting a little expensive, perhaps I might have to move to Brooklyn one day or something.

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That's what all the artists down here went to, to Brooklyn because of the rent: it's cheaper. And but, you know, as long as I can still stay around, I'm gonna try to dress up my neighborhood, the day I leave, I leave, it's the best I can do. [laughter]

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Now the stuff that you do, the memorial walls and the commercial stuff, do you still try to - is there still graffiti-like aesthetic? Like the way you make the lettering or something. Is that still an aesthetic from your early days, how you would do stuff in the style even though you're not doing tagging or graffiti on a train, you still kind of bring some of that style in the memorials?

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<i>Chico</i>: Into the memorials, yeah. The memorials, you know once you do like a face, or you put clouds or put an angel, you know you

wanna see a little color in there too, so you take the name of the guy "In memory of [?] Johnny" and you put a little...you know, a little color in there. In fact I used their memorial - I forgot to mention, I came back from Germany recently and this Italian kid [?]. In fact I got [?] 80-something street.

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I put Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and then right in front I put two hands like this with a rosary around it, and then put the names of the guys who passed away right on it, and it looks beautiful. Jesus [?] elementary school [?] schoolyard. I did it over the weekend and it was beautiful, beautiful, I gotta take pictures of it.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: How long does it take to do a mural?

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<i>Chico</i>: That one took me 2 days.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: And is that like normal time?

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<i>Chico</i>: Uh it's really - you know for me, I'm pretty fast, it could take me a day.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: Like all-day working from morning to evening?

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<i>Chico</i>: Around 8, 9 o'clock, [?] sometimes 2 or 5. It depends because I do a lot of talking more than I do work. [laughter]

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People come up to me: "Oh listen, Chico, how long have you been doing this for? Blah blah blah blah." they come by and take take pictures "Blah blah blah" You know, so you start explaining to them, and so forget about it, you know?

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: You work at night, do you put lights out or something?

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<i>Chico</i>: Yeah, I used to do that a lot, but now I don't have a vehicle now, so I don't carry any lights with me.

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Used to carry it, put it in my trunk and put it on, now I just work without the light - I work with the light from the street.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: How much - so how much does it cost now on average for you or anyone to get like a wall - to do a wall?

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<i>Chico</i>: Well let me tell you, since I don't want to do anymore memorials. Like that one I just did over by uh [?], I got paid fifteen hundred for it, for that wall.

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That was including paint, and that was pretty cheap for them, but if you talk to the [?] they will not charge you that much. Especially with 3 handbooks [?] like this, 1, 2, 3 handbook [?]. The one over there is huge, I mean, I could - I got to take pictures of it. I definitely got to go over and take pictures of it, it's like the biggest memorial I've ever done. So uh, if there was a [?] that was gonna do it probably [?], knowing them [?] at least 3 or 4Gs for them, and they would probably [?] too, you know because they cooperate and everything so. You know, it shows the people they're a little more hip now, you know what I mean? [laughter] [?] followed by Chico.[?] because it doesn't work that way with me.

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<i>Speaker 2</i>: So you said it's okay to go into someone else's neighborhood and do a memorial wall because you said you wouldn't want someone to come into your neighborhood and do something, but that's okay for you to go to another neighborhood?

<i>Chico</i>: Well, you know I started - I'm not saying I'm the king because I'm not, I'm one of the main components of the graf - uh the memorials. [?] point actually w I started the memorial scene. I think I put a lot of money in my friend's pocket, so if I had to go down to Brooklyn and do one of their areas, I'm sure they wouldn't have a problem with that. Because it's like they already know who I am and they gave me mad respect, I've been around doing this when I first started doing the walls and the streets as well. Nobody around was doing street murals, only me only 2 [?], but after that I didn't see anyone else doing it: I started that [?] murals the size of the buildings. I mean even in this area there were no murals at all,[?] memorials. [crosstalk] Yeah, the gates and everything, I was [?] signs, so I thought I was doing a lot. I contributed a lot to the art history here. I started all that, I'm trying to make my area like an art gallery, like I said. And I wanted people to come down - I mean remember that young girl? She said "Oh my god, this graffiti" you know? I bet you she'll come back 15 years from now later, 10 years later, she's gonna say "Oh my god, Chico really did a good job here' [?] walls, paintings, it looks safer.

<i>Speaker 2</i>: And I think a lot of people still don't see the difference between like bad graffiti and wall, I think a lot of people just think - there's some of people who think it's-

<i>Chico</i>: Well they must be really naïve or stupid because I mean -

<i>Speaker 2</i>: [?] you told me a couple weeks ago they - when they were doing that big [?] mural, they got arrested.

<i>Chico</i>: They got arrested, yeah.

<i>Speaker 2</i>: There they are doing a beautiful piece of artwork, but you can still get arrested. I the peop- mean cops still arrested them for -

<i>Chico</i>: Well they didn't have permission actually, that's what they got arrested for, not because they were doing the work. They knew what they was doing. [?] the Bronx, the cops see it everyday, you know. They just realized that [?], then they have permission, they wait until they finish so they can arrest them, simple as that. Same thing with me, I don't care that Chico or Keith Haring, Keith Haring got arrested for drug things. "Do you have permission for it?" "No." So, as long as you get permission you'll be alright, but if you're going to go out there trying to be a king or hero [?] you're going to get arrested. Somebody's gonna come up there [?] people from the building complain and you would get arrested for it.

<i>Speaker 2</i>: Are people complaining that you're trying to beautify the neighborhood or something, or -

<i>Chico</i>: Well it depends on what you're putting up. If you're putting a memorial of Fat Joe(?), then I'd understand, I mean nobody was complaining that day but the cops [?] you know, make a show. Wanted to wait for them to finish and people to leave and they got, you know. It works both ways, "you guys got permission?" "No but-" [?] just go Downtown and [?] me over there. [laughter] [?] got arrested, I mean I told them [?] something [?] the cops even if he was lying. You know, but...

00:43:16.000 --> 00:43:42.000

<i>Speaker 2</i>: But it didn't work out with the person in that building, did [?][crosstalk]

<i>Chico</i>: Yeah, you know the had to [?] up.

<i>Speaker 2</i>: But now, most - a lot of your work is down here, a lot of your work in Lower East Side and stuff but um, and you've stuff done Brooklyn, you said most of your work is in Manhattan, New York City. Did you move from New York to Manhattan?

<i>Chico</i>: Manhattan, yeah. I've been - if you've ever been to Bigington, New York, that's upstate. [crosstalk] So if you go to that city, my work is over there too.

00:43:42.000 --> 00:44:35.000

<i>Speaker 2</i>: Really? Why -

<i>Chico</i>: Schools were hiring, they gave me 2 or 3 weeks to uh - you know what's going on in Bigington now is the [?] kids that are moving from the Bronx over to that area. They'll buy houses or whatever, section or whatever you call that, B - welfare stuff-

<i>Speaker 2</i>: Section 8?

<i>Chico</i>: Section 8 yeah, they're giving them houses down by Bigington in New York. So what's going on over there, they're getting involved with kids over there and they're selling drugs and gangs and going over there, so the [?] was kind of scared, so they called me meaning I've been in the streets and I could probably talk to these kids. So I went over there and had a word with them and [?] and I said: "Look, I want to draw something against violence. You guys are moving into a different turf,[?] respect other peoples' territory and turf." and I spoke to them like I was in the street and it was like a message. I was over there for about 2 or 3 months working with the community.

00:44:35.000 --> 00:45:03.260

<i>Speaker 2</i>: How long ago was that?

<i>Chico</i>: That was about 4 years ago.

<i>Speaker 2</i>: And also you said you've been all over Europe - [crosstalk]. What was that, Germany? Germany is very popular -

<i>Chico</i>: I've been to Germany, I've been to Holland, I've been to Amsterdam, I've been to uhh, what was that city, Hanover, I've been to the one next to Hanover - anyway, I drove in a car to the next city...



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