

# Oral History interview with Sister Karen

Los Angeles, California

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## Part 1 of 2

**Duration - 28:44**

DENISE LUGO: Tape 1, October 1, 1986. Sister Karen, you have been the director of Self-Help since its origin?

SISTER KAREN: Yes, I have.

DENISE LUGO: What year was the beginning of Self-Help?

SISTER KAREN: Well, we actually got incorporated in 1972, but we had been operating out of a garage in 1971.

DENISE LUGO: Where; what block and what city?

SISTER KAREN: It was on [...] 1161 Eastman Street; where [...] five other Sisters and myself lived. We had a garage and we would silk screen in the garage.

DENISE LUGO: [...] How did the inception come about?

SISTER KAREN: Well, I just came back from Philadelphia and I had just gotten my ... I have been enrolled for about 5 years. When I came back to LA, I had originally lived here. So some of the Sisters were living here until I joined them.

DENISE LUGO: Okay, what sisters? What do you mean?

SISTER KAREN: Sisters of Saint Francis from River City and I began in looking for employment but I didn't want to work in a university or colleges. I wanted to do something with the communities and I happened to meet, which I don't recall his name, a friend of mine told me to go that someone was looking for someone to start up a ... apartment. So I had a degree in printmaking so I went to go talk to him....

DENISE LUGO: From what university?

SISTER KAREN: Well he was in Proctor Central it was a community organization but nothing really happen there, except I met two young men Carlos Buenos and Antonio Ibanez and then I decided to go ahead and try and work something out and they decided to come and when we would get together and start doing silk screen in the garage because I knew how to do silk screen and I had ... people something like that.

[CUTS OFF]

DENISE LUGO: Ok, the silk screen. Was it the posters you were working on? What was the purpose or function of them?

SISTER KAREN: Well, it wasn't actually posters. Carlos Buenos did the designs and Antonio pulled the silk screen and I mixed the colors and we mostly did colors with designs. At the same time we were exhibiting a mixture of ... and they would try and salvage those.

DENISE LUGO: What kind of art was it? Do you remember?

SISTER KAREN: Well it had a very delicate message and flavor.

DENISE LUGO: Uh-huh.

SISTER KAREN: And, of course this is just the beginning during the...

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, and these were Chicano or Mexican?

SISTER KAREN: These were Mexican man from Mexico who only spoke Spanish. So after we go through that then my community, I asked them for money then wanted to rent the place. A friend of mine, a friend of my mother's, Raul Brendan, who lived in the neighborhood, saw the place on 2211 Brooklyn Ave and saw that it was empty. So he and myself went to look at it and it was a very large ... for storage. So what we did was make a agreement with the owner that he would rent to us but we had to move a lot of boxes in order to see down to the basic floor before he would rent to us. So we did that. And my community, I wrote to them for a two thousand dollar grant, that's the Sisters from Saint Francis, and they gave me the ten thousand dollar grant. At that time we were not incorporated but they gave me the grant. So then I began to rent the studio space and we began to work.

DENISE LUGO: Did the other Sisters help you also? [...]

SISTER KAREN: Well the only, the only person as soon as we got the grant, the only person was Sister Margaret then who is now in Mexico. She did all the bookwork, but she had an additional job and since she was keeping me booked and keeping track of the money, I feel like we got a very good start ... Then I had to leave for another grant for ... development and that's when I decided to incorporate. So I got the organization together and incorporated.

DENISE LUGO: Was that within a year or so?

SISTER KAREN: That was within a maybe about 9 years.

DENISE LUGO: So that was the beginning of 1972, right?

SISTER KAREN: Yes.

DENISE LUGO: And, be honest, who were the artists? Were there artists that you could recall?

SISTER KAREN: Well yes. Shortly after that, Frank Hernandez who ... and a man by the name of Eddy Garcia.

DENISE LUGO: Paint a picture.

SISTER KAREN: Well, what I could tell you is that you could see the grant from the ... development and they did not want any of it to go to administration and since I was the only person at that time that had the most English skills because, both Carlos and me, I sort of became the person who did the paper work. We actually gave stipends to artists to do their own work as it was. Like there was Emmanuel and Rogelio, I forgot their last names, but some were doing murals and making ... others were doing their own work. Immediately we started a gallery where we had exhibits and we started silkscreen department and we began to work with children. Getting the children workshops from the neighborhood.

DENISE LUGO: What was the location for this?

SISTER KAREN: It was 2111 Brooklyn Ave.

DENISE LUGO: I want to get the climate. What was it like in 1971-1972? What was going on besides Mechicano?

SISTER KAREN: Well art. While the climate was very interesting and energetic, the thing is, I sort of walked into this, rather naive innocent work and at that time Joe Gonzales had just started with Goes gallery and Mechicano had already been offering ...

DENISE LUGO: Since the fall of 1969?

SISTER KAREN: Right. So when we began, we just began in a simple way by renting a place and people would drop by and there was a lot of energy going on and people would go from group to group.

DENISE LUGO: How many artists do you think were—?

SISTER KAREN: Well eventually we had about 10 artists on our payroll.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah, but at the beginning, how many were coming in and out? Did you have like a membership?

SISTER KAREN: No we didn't haven any type of membership.

DENISE LUGO: It was open.

SISTER KAREN: It was just open. And at that time thought there was a lot of energy I the air but there was a lot also of confusion in a way because [...] there was a sense of something historical happening and therefore people were very cautious and at the same time there was a lot of energy going on. So we just began to have exhibits and whoever showed up and wanted to be in the exhibit could be in the exhibit. We didn't, from the beginning, do any membership because we felt that would create division in the community by trying to set up one group against group and so on.

DENISE LUGO: Because you know that happens anyways?

SISTER KAREN: Well that happened but it happened as a result as some individuals but it didn't happen as a result of what Self-Help was trying to do at all. I mean we were just open to what it always was.

DENISE LUGO: Okay, Mechicano was at that time bringing in other people and young artists to bring them there and having them do a lot of their posters and having them do silk screen. You did the same thing right?

SISTER KAREN: Yes, yes we did. We did have a lot of people doing their own posters and them we also hired silk screen artist.

DENISE LUGO: [...] Could an artist, lets say be involved with Mechicano and same time be involved in yours?

SISTER KAREN: Yah. That was the ideas and that did happen and also.

DENISE LUGO: Could you think of anyone that was—?

SISTER KAREN: There was Manuel Cruz who was at Mechicano and was doing silkscreen and different things with Self-Help. Also we had Alvaro Lopez and he shortly after that and Alvaro set up photography department and he started a photography group called *Ojo*, and they did a very large piece of photography. One whole summer I paid Alvaro to go around the community to take photographs and then he organized the whole following year. Then he also started an artist union, which was an effort to get everyone together.

DENISE LUGO: Was that the united alliance of art?

SISTER KAREN: yes.

DENISE LUGO: That was many artists were involved.

SISTER KAREN: It was a lot of people. Sometimes there were as many as 150 people, other times there was even 25. Now, at that moment again Mechicano was going and Goes was going and Plaza was also going.

DENISE LUGO: Yes.

SISTER KAREN: So artists were moving all around. As far as I'm concerned, there were people who moved from Mechicano to Self-Help and still did things at Mechicano. I feel that Mechicano was really critical because they were more or less working with people like in a sense off the street kind of thing, you know? Like in a store front kind of idea.

DENISE LUGO: Yes.

SISTER KAREN: And Self-Help was a little more structural in some way because since we were a lot of women involved we couldn't tolerate a lot of too much ...

DENISE LUGO: Do you remember having conversations with Laura Bright or Leonard Castaneda?

SISTER KAREN: Yes, well one time Leonard had invited us over and he had a meeting at his place at which he was talking about grants coming in and those type of things. We had not received any grants in the community but there was some idea in the air that Mechicano was having problems and I think it was not long after that.

DENISE LUGO: What year was that? That was 1975. Right? 1976.

SISTER KAREN: I think it has to be.

DENISE LUGO: Okay. Where they move and they were in Whittier?

SISTER KAREN: That's 1974, 1975

DENISE LUGO: Yeah-yeah. No, no, no they moved in 1975 or 1976 ... after that.

SISTER KAREN: So there were lots of artist involved. For example, we had almost 10 to 20 people who just put up exhibits; they came on Saturdays. It was just done on Saturdays.

DENISE LUGO: Do you remember any names?

SISTER KAREN: Well we had Linda ... Rocha, Carlos Buenos, Antonio, Alfredo, Isaac, which is another person from Mexico.

DENISE LUGO: Tell me, I find it very interesting, lets say Ray Atleano, who is in mechicano and it had all of the education in an institute for 16 years ... the same thing you had here. You had artists that came from Mexico, very educated, and where in the Chicano environment ...

SISTER KAREN: Well you know everybody can be educated. Probably the language and probably the—

DENISE LUGO: But there's obviously a difference, but I am taking about the philosophical differences in the education. Because in Mexico everything is very different education that turns art and say that people you—

SISTER KAREN: Well- you see that was that's what's always been interesting and bound to hold concept of a community center or if you want to call it a center in a "barrio" because you have people in many different levels. Some people had no art education at all, some people who have not finished high school, other people who have gone to college and you have everyone talking to each other that have these different levels of education. So this really didn't hinder in one way or some ways, or maybe it did, but there was a bonding because everybody was interested in the culture. So weather you're Mexican-... you were interested in the culture.

DENISE LUGO: Also the mural things, how did that come about? Do you remember how you started doing group mural project? Was there a system?

SISTER KAREN: Well actually Self-Help didn't do as it were mural projects. The people who did some of the artists that were involved were the same artists because we were very open. For example, Carlos ... was working at United Nations. He also was working at our studio and then Judy Hernandez actually when Alvaro was involved in different projects. We had a lot of different projects that overlapped and then people would come and work on them ... We started the Day of the Dead sometime in 1970.

DENISE LUGO: That's in 1973.

SISTER KAREN: Even ASCO. Willy Herron and those people came in for a while working in the studio to try to do something for the Day of the Dead and then they finished up the project, it was a wonderful the project. So people would come in and work on certain things, like the Day of the Dead, and we would have supplies and we would have some of the space so on when they do things. And Carlos ... did some paintings there, John Valdez did silk-screens ... all the artists ... and that's when Frank Romero came in.

DENISE LUGO: [...] Did they actually work here as Los Four? I think they had a show here.

SISTER KAREN: Yes, they did.

DENISE LUGO: Was it put together?

SISTER KAREN: That's right they did and Gill Lujan was involved in the Day of the Dead, did Day of the Dead.

DENISE LUGO: We were talking about the early structure of Self-Help. So from artists that I talked to and people, everyone refers to Self-Help as part of the central. I mean that's one thing that most people always thought about in the early 1970's ... and Self-Help ... the murals public programs the bench painting ... How did Juan Murierra and the other centers- they were—

SISTER KAREN: They were also involved. There was someone by the name Rivera Esperanza who did posters for ... See when you do Day of the Dead we always had work done.

DENISE LUGO: Talk a little of the Day of the Dead in concept in what it is.

SISTER KAREN: The Day of the Dead is a celebration really of also of life and remembering them. The original idea was 5 or 6 guys were sitting around the studio and we were talking about the fact that if all the artists can do something together that might help us a little bit so create some sort of unity. So we thought about the Day of the Dead. We got the inks down for Day of the Dead. We view that down and we decided to have a parade to go to the cemetery and do workshops in the studio. Now, at that time I was the one responsibly getting funded, so the first day of the dead we just walked on the sidewalk and we just invited. We had an artists; Carlos Sanraz(?) came, ASCO came. ... That was like 1972 maybe and everybody was going to participate in the Day of the Dead in any way they wanted to do it. So as I said, we had supplies out there and they can come and they can do the Day of the Dead. At the same time, we have offered the studio from some of the surrounding

schools we had some workshops. So we have the children come in and on the floor we put big banners and big things and they painted ... and all type of things and then we'd decorate the whole studio. We would take all the furniture and everything that we had in the studio and push it way to the end of one studio we had a very large space and then we'd have the whole gallery. We created a huge alter, like a 10 foot alter.

DENISE LUGO: Collaboration.

SISTER KAREN: And then somebody would come in and put up maps like in Gill Lujan. The alter, what we do, is we set it up and have a big table there which is the base of the alter and decorate the wall and other people would come in and add, and add, and add. From the community this is the artist that the community does. Then we done to that pattern of having this great; so we all made things on Saturdays. It was open house, anybody could come in and make things, anything for themselves that they were going to carry in the parade, their costumes or whatever your going to make and then they made things for other people to carry because from that day whoever ... something to carry. It was structured but it wasn't so structured that no one can come in. Then we had musical groups come, theater groups come and a lot of people ... because no one can afford to pay for income theater groups. We had theatrical bono and all those all those groups. Even one year for the Day of the Dead ... and did some big production ... so that was a long ten year history and that was basically that's what we did. As a result of that community people would come, artists would come, different people would come in and that was about three months ahead of November 2nd. So we would start in the summer and then go on and start. There was about a four or five-hour celebration went very fast. Eventually we started to march down the street from there because there was so many people to come out of their houses and destroying it. As I said, we opened it up so that we would have certain things on the schedule but anyone can participate. Anybody can come in do face paintings do some murals. I think Gill Lujan one time brought a whole bunch of spray cans and did a mural with the cans. We saw a lot of activity. We made our own fondue. We just had plain fun and had our sugar skulls on there we did that all together. Sometimes we did it at my house or sometimes at the studio. That's the kind of thing but it was a highly decorated affair. We had sometimes like 10 by 5 feet wide huge banners were we put 3 dimensional. We put flowers on it and paint on it paste paper on it. They were all colleges ... We had the whole place decorated ... and then what we would do is bring food for the alter and afterwards about 25-30 people that really worked on it the hardest would just stay ... and that was part of the whole fun. We got a lot of flowers and decorated whole alter with a lot of flowers and gave everybody a flower.

DENISE LUGO: [...] So it was pretty normal, let's say for artists doing here and work for one or two years weather ... lets say go back to Mexico and then—

SISTER KAREN: Well actually after we got started we didn't have that many Mexican ... they were mostly Chicanos ... Okay, we started in 1972 and then three years later in 1975, by 1975 we got a grant from community development to do ... awards for a year. That was a grant which we actually had a ban with ... inside and we went around to the different schools. We went to Park, we went to recreation centers, huge group, and we would work

with them photography, silkscreen, sculpture, even filmmaking. Its very low on history we did a lot of things and just a lot so it pretty hard to barrel down. And the photography place was because of Alvaro. That's another thing we did. Someone would walk in the door and they were willing to do something and they had a strong point. One set of photography department so we set up a professional room and then we set up three other ... for students to come. And even in the beginning for example like you said in those magazines, "Lowriders", they did a few photography things for their magazine in very ... style.

DENISE LUGO: ... *Con Safo Generación* (Generation), I cannot recall the name but—

SISTER KAREN: No everybody went through me because the artists were over doing things in San Diego. They were doing things all over. Each artist was doing things and that was part of our basic philosophy; was everybody brought resources and together we can share those things.

DENISE LUGO: So it was natural to have people pull up paper ... in San Diego? ... Sacramento come in and Air Force and work, spend one night and leave ... open door?

SISTER KAREN: Well its kind of indoor thing you know definitely.

DENISE LUGO: Did you actually put artwork in public places like in schools? Like mechicano did or everything get posters and artwork and put it up there?

SISTER KAREN: Well we did exhibit for a month in ... down here in East Los Angeles. Then we would do it in churches and schools and different places ... but most of the time we had exhibits in our own studio and we had quite a bit of people pitching in. It was a very mixed group too. It wasn't a whole all-young people or all older people it was very mixed group. And like ASCO had one of the first shows at Self-Help. That was a big day for all of us. Then Los Four have been. Then different groups would combine together and have them; different individual artists.

DENISE LUGO: Talking about the mainstream.

SISTER KAREN: Well we're talking about the mainstream but actually mainstream was ignored to the side.

DENISE LUGO: Totally?

SISTER KAREN: Well I can't say totally because mechicano have had an exhibit on last November.

DENISE LUGO: Yeah. Yeah they had also had people like Carlos Almaraz ...

SISTER KAREN: But after that there weren't much new things.

DENISE LUGO: How did the artists feel about this?

SISTER KAREN: Well I think that people actually really resented it. They wanted to exhibit that for example the city ... and another big player in all this was ... Verano and he was from



... and he was involved in trying to get into the fair and for the most part I think that there wasn't that much connection. It was a lot of individual efforts here and there, but a lot of people were conversing with one another. I think the greatest movement at that time progressing what was going on was the murals. ... that started that when ... project and so some of the artists were very much involved in that. There was a lot of discussion and a lot of rhetoric and a lot of—

DENISE LUGO: Do you remember some of the philosophical differences?

SISTER KAREN: There was a great effort to try to make collectives; that's what people were trying to do. That's what we were trying also to do, Self-Help, is to have a collective; to have that type of sharing and that type of working together. It worked as far as some murals were concerned because you have people from 9 to 55 years old; very art education, some haven't been to art school, like Carlos Almaraz, never. All working on murals together but when it actually came to organization, so when it actually came to another project ... difficult ... all the people really wanted to and they saw that but the resources were very limited.

DENISE LUGO: I have a question, the women, how did the women do?

SISTER KAREN: Well we had like Lupe Estrada was working on a photography project with Alvaro and Linda Quinn who is really Mexican-American ... and there was also Linda Rivera was working with photography. At that time we got this idea to have a couple people come down and have individual artists apply to the ying-yang. So we had a variety of people come and I think it was Mary Bambow ... and different people we tried to help them ... The idea there was to try to get as many Chicanos as possible. So there was a lot of effort at trying to do things together and trying to get things moving. But money was very short and resources were really short and it was really difficult. It was especially difficult for the women.

DENISE LUGO: Okay you were by then- lets say by 1974-1975, you were in tune what's happening in a national sense ... I heard a lot about you ... a lot of people come out of the country I mean out of state.

SISTER KAREN: Well there was a point in which there was a few people interested and there were a lot of people out of the states. It's always been very interesting because people would come by and look at this and look at that. There were a lot of individuals that were around a lot of energy, but by 1975 Self-Help itself is what I can talk about; we got a little bit more focused into the ... art studio ... about 10 artists and part time and we used to go ... and by that time Alvaro was gone and some of the people that worked- well I have all their ... studio and we began to get a little bit—

[End of Interview]