



# Chavez collection continues legacy of excellence in Chicano resources

When you enter the Cesar E. Chavez Collection area on the first floor of Michigan State University's Main Library, you might not realize that you're standing in the middle of a student movement. Established by MSU alumnus and librarian emeritus Diana Rivera in 1995, the Chavez collection was founded in the wake of the campus-wide campaign urging the university to support the United Farm Worker's Grape Boycott. This campaign was led by chapter student group MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan) and called for the university to support its Chicano and Latino students who came from farmworker families by joining the boycott. The MSU Office of the President and MEChA came to an agreement that included recognizing the boycott by creating the Chavez collection in honor of the eponymous United Farm Worker leader.

In speaking about the formation of the Chavez collection today, Rivera continues to emphasize the work of the students as a cornerstone of the collection she established to foreground Chicano and Puerto Rican studies. According to Rivera, when the collection was created in 1995, much of the curation was done by students eager to make available research reflecting the areas in which Chavez himself spent his life working, such as labor, education, non-violence, diversity and culture. The impetus for the collection itself, however, had much earlier roots in the student activism of the 1970s, specifically during the grape and lettuce boycotts that led to the largest farm worker strike in U.S. history. Rivera herself was active in these demonstrations here on campus, as she was completing her undergraduate degree in racial and ethnic studies through the College of Urban Development (CUD). Established in 1973, the CUD was, according to a college mission statement from the University Archives and Historical Collections, meant to identify and address issues stemming from racial and ethnic discrimination and prejudice. It comprised two units: the

Department of Urban and Metropolitan Studies and the Department of Racial and Ethnic Studies. Since the college was still relatively new in Rivera's senior year, she said she found herself essentially creating her own syllabus.

"I had to make up a lot of my own coursework because I enrolled in a new college that had a new department, and there weren't a lot of courses developed yet. I took independent studies from the faculty there, and I created a lot of my own research areas to study and work on."

This innovative approach is one that Rivera continued to deploy as she went on from MSU to earn her Master of Science in Information degree from University of Michigan in 1978. Her first son Diego was born in November of that year, and Rivera brought him with her to class for the duration of the one-year program. Upon completion of the program, Rivera's husband Pedro took an internship in Arizona, and the family followed him westward. In Arizona, Rivera learned that she was three credits shy of the graduation requirement at University of Michigan and enrolled in an independent study course that she completed at the Pima Community College Library. The family returned to Michigan in 1982, which is when Rivera applied to an opening at the MSU Libraries as assistant to the head of what was then the humanities area. Rivera eventually found herself in the Urban Policy and Planning branch of the Main Library, which is where she was able to plant the seed for her first MSU Libraries legacy: the Map Library now located on 2-East.

"I was working with the planners and landscape architects within the Urban Policy and Planning collections, and I told the director, Richard Chapin, that we should have a map library and named some Big 10 schools that had one," Rivera said. Chapin agreed, and the collection began to grow, albeit within the confines of the art collections in what was then known as



From top left: Rivera at the dedication of the Chavez collection in 1995.

Rivera was interviewed by Gustavo Valdés, CNN en Español reporter, in August 2019, for the feature “El sóftbol ayuda a unir a la comunidad latina en Michigan.”

From left: Sonya Hernandez, then-Assistant Director of the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Grand Rapids Community College; Breanna Escamilla (MSU Library student staff); Lupe Ramos-Montigny (Michigan State Board of Education member); and Rivera in the Special Collection Patriarch Room. Photo by Leslie Behm.

Rivera with friend and mentor Dolores Huerta, President of the Dolores Huerta Foundation, co-founder of the United Farm Workers Association and a 2012 recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, in the Chavez collection alcove in 2018. Photo by Pete Cookingham.

the Arts and Maps Library. According to Rivera, the majority of the Arts and Maps Library was composed of art collections, with approximately one-fifth of the space dedicated to maps material. The Map Library was formally established under Chapin's successor, Hiram Davis, in 1993 and today holds over 250 thousand sheet maps, 14 thousand folded geologic maps and four thousand atlases, gazetteers and other reference aids.

"You know, getting the Chavez collection was huge," Rivera noted. "It was a significant step for the Libraries and the university. In addition to the Chavez collection being established, the Map Library has always been my baby. I'm really proud of that — lots of really good students went through there in terms of student staff, student supervisors and on-call employees."



Former Chicano/Latino Studies Librarian Diana Rivera (left) and current Chicano/Latino Studies Librarian Andrea Salazar McMillan (right).

Rivera was head of the Map Library when she started the Chavez collection, which she again says was made possible by the work of students. She recalls that there were about 10 students and staff who were particularly invested in assisting with the establishment of the collection. These students were primarily Latino, some of whom had overlapping involvement with MECha, with a few non-Latino students doing work within the online library catalog.

"These students were looking through old catalogs that I had received over the years and had just filed," Rivera said. "They were going through catalogs and finding titles of books, pamphlets, reports, and what would be known as "zines" now, and flyers, posters, recordings, video recordings, and audio recordings to bring in to the Chicano and Puerto Rican library collection. There was a lot of investment by the students."

Given Rivera's history of student support, it seems natural that the person who succeeded her as head of the Chavez collection began her career at the MSU Libraries as a student worker. Andrea Salazar McMillan now oversees the Chavez collection in her role as the Chicano & Latino Studies Librarian, which includes curating and developing collections in the area of Chicano & Latino Studies for the Stephen O. Murray & Keelung Hong Special Collections. McMillan got her start at the MSU Libraries as a student worker in 2007 but didn't officially meet Rivera until five years later. During that time McMillan graduated and was hired into the Interlibrary Services unit of the MSU Libraries, which is when she began chatting with Rivera around the Libraries.

"She would ask me about what I was doing and what my plans were, and I told her I was going to grad school for librarianship, and she was like, that's awesome," McMillan said. "I feel like she might have been dropping hints because she started saying stuff about how great it would be for a Latina to work with the Chavez collection when she left in the future and things like that."

After McMillan graduated from Wayne State University with her Master's in Library and Information Science, she was accepted into the first cohort of MSU Libraries' Residency Program in 2018. Residency interviews included a candidate presentation segment, and McMillan said that Rivera's presence in the audience during her presentation gave her a sense of relief.

"It felt good to see her, since it was incredibly nerve-racking having to present in front of colleagues. My presentation was on critical librarianship and academic libraries, and I was specifically pointing out the things that the residency was



really aiming to help change. Like the fact that there's not a lot of librarians of color in the field — even though there have been all kinds of diversity and pipeline programs for 30 years, it's still very much a white space. Talking about what it looks like when we're thinking about these kinds of ideas and representation in different aspects of librarianships. And I just felt Diana nodding her head. It was very comforting to know she was totally in my corner.”

McMillan said that it was nearer to Rivera's retirement when she really got to know both Rivera and the work she was doing. After Rivera retired in 2019, the two kept in touch, and Rivera continued to encourage McMillan to consider working with the Chavez collection. Eventually McMillan became curious and reached out to former Head of Special Collections Peter Berg and former Associate Dean Steve Sowards, who was then overseeing the Special Collections unit. Berg and Sowards readily agreed that McMillan was a good candidate to fill Rivera's former position as curator of the collection. McMillan was officially named curator of the Chavez collection in April 2019.

“Diana Rivera was uniquely prepared to develop the Chavez collection, as both an experienced academic librarian and a member of the community, at MSU and in greater Lansing,” Sowards noted. “Her contacts and skills combined to launch a successful collection, and today Andrea McMillan brings similar strengths to the ongoing work with this intensively used part of the Libraries.”

After McMillan became curator of the Chavez collection, she “learned that the collection isn't just the Chavez browsing collection but extends to the Special Collections and its related archives as well.” According to McMillan, Rivera created an overlap between the Chavez collection and the other larger Libraries units in acquiring materials that could be classified as both Chavez and archival collection resources. This acquisition strategy resulted in a budget surplus that allowed for the growth of a supplemental primary research collection that still lives in Special Collections today. McMillan said these types of resources are especially important because of the Chicano and Latino Studies Program offered at MSU. The MSU CLS Program was established in 1997, largely in response to 1994's MEChA-led protest, and is currently one of only eight doctoral programs in the U.S.

“Diana very early on recognized the importance, value and critical need to have primary source materials,” McMillan said. “And supporting researchers, especially now that we have a program like this. So she was doing this before that program was created, but I feel like she just saw so far ahead into the future — looking outward, you know, versus thinking about what's just going on now.”

Although Rivera employed a forward-facing perspective as head of the Chavez collection, the items she noted as some of favorites within the collection have their roots in the past. One of those items is a framed UFW flag that was donated by Julio Guerrero that now resides in the José F. Treviño Chicano/Latinx Activism Collection, which was established by Rivera as a separate archival collection in 2000. Rivera also cited the



newsletters from what was then known as the Office of Minority Student Affairs under then-Assistant Provost Lee June as being unique items in the Chavez collection. Rivera herself donated these newsletters to the collection, explaining that during the time they were circulating the newsletters “that was our email.” The items that hold the most meaning for Rivera however, are the shirts that she and her husband donated from their days participating in the women's and men's softball teams formed by the Chicano Students for Progressive Action (CHISPA).

“When I first started at MSU, the students from CHISPA were the most Chicano folks I had been around other than my family, and I come from a big family. The back and forth that we got from each other in talking about issues — the social, the political, the cultural — meant a lot. The guys got together and started a men's softball team, and then the women got together and started a women's softball team. I kept my shirt for years, but I didn't know why. And then I knew why—I donated it. I donated my husband's as well; I have a picture of him when he graduated from undergrad at our apartment on Cherry Lane, cutting his graduation cake, and he has that shirt on. Those two items in particular are special to me just because of where we wore them, what they meant to us.”



Pedro Rivera in CHISPA softball T-shirt. Photo courtesy of Diana Rivera.

*MSU Libraries patrons can view these items and more by visiting the Cesar E. Chavez Collection on the first floor of the Main Library's West Wing or by contacting collection curator Andrea McMillan. Patrons can also access the Murray & Hong Special Collections materials in the MSU Libraries' Reading Room by appointment at [lib.msu.edu/murray-hong-spc](http://lib.msu.edu/murray-hong-spc).*