FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Javier Vela**

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13 Pages

Transcript

GOODSILL: Today is October 14, 2015. I'm interviewing Javier Vela for the Fort Bend County Historic Commission as part of a series on building at 307 Fort Street, Richmond, Texas. This building had several different functions. It was originally a jail and then a probation office, and now it's the Office of Emergency Management. At what point in this building's life did you work here?

VELA: I came to this building when it first opened as a Juvenile Detention Facility. I arrived in Fort Bend County and was hired as a Juvenile Probation Officer in June 1979. This building became a detention center probably in 1981 (or) 1982.

In 1979 we detained our juveniles and had to transport them to Brazoria County. Fort Bend County had a contract with Brazoria County to house the juveniles who were detained by the juvenile courts. I did a lot of traveling between Richmond and Angleton. I would transport not only the kids that were under my supervision but also the male juveniles who were ordered detained that belonged to the two female officers. I was the only male officer so I did all the transporting.

GOODSILL: A lot of driving. You mean several times a day?

VELA: Maybe two or three times a week depending on the arrests and how long they were detained. We had no control over what came in the front door.

GOODSILL: Where did they stay?

VELA: It was the old Juvenile Detention Facility in Angleton. The Probation facility and Detention Facility were the same building. I would transport the kids to Angleton and come back. I did that until this building was opened. It looks a lot of the same but obviously there's been a lot of renovation. There were probation officers and detention officers were hired to be here 24 hours.

GOODSILL: Two separate functions, detention officers and probation officers. Tell us what the responsibilities of the detention officers were.

VELA: The responsibilities of the detention officers were to transport kids for court hearings from the detention center to the courthouse where they appeared before the judge. The probation officers that were housed here supervised the juveniles in our community. We used the cells on the lower floor and we had some cells on the second floor that housed juveniles.

My office was up on the second floor. The chief's office was on the first floor. There were both male and female detention officers to deal with the males and females, respectively, that were brought in. The transporting also involved taking juveniles to Brownwood, Texas, where the judge sentenced a juveniles to TYC (Texas Youth Commission). As a Probation Officer I would transport those juveniles, other times detention workers would transport them.

GOODSILL: What were the kind of things that would bring a juvenile into the detention center?

VELA: There are two kinds of offenses. Juveniles who committed crimes from burglary up to murder. Some kids who were regarded as status offenders such as runaways or kids who were truant from school. The detention facility was used not only to house but also to detain kids if there was a hearing waiting to be held. Now if the juvenile offender needed psychological services or testing, psychiatrists would come here. We had a contract with Doctor Allsmith and another doctor who were psychiatrists. Based on their findings, probation officers would made recommendations to the juvenile courts with respect to what treatment programs the juveniles would be sent to and what type of counseling would be recommended.

GOODSILL: The way the cells were set up, were they individuals cells or group cells?

VELA: They were individual cells. We were never full. If we only had one or two kids it was sometimes easier to keep them down here so detention workers wouldn't have to be going up and down the stairs. There was a system in place where they would make detention workers be on the grounds to make sure the kids were okay. They were also fed here. We used this kitchen. I think it was good-old TV dinners at that time. Other times we would do something special. I remember when Steve Monk was the chief. He would barbecue burgers for the kids. That was always a treat for them. Any time a child would come in sick or get sick, we called Emergency Services and they would come in and tend to them and care for them. I remember we were never to capacity.

GOODSILL: What is the capacity, do you remember?

VELA: At that time, I'd guess capacity was about seventy inmates. I think that there were no individual cells because (for) adults you would keep maybe three or four in one cell. For the most part we tried to keep the kids apart but on occasion when there were two that wculdn't get along, we would keep them in individual cells provided we had enough. Detention workers were here at night and probation officers were here during the day.

GOODSILL: If somebody got called in in the middle of the night for a disturbance or something like that, would detention officers or police officers go pick them up?

VELA: The police would go pick up the kid. If they arrested a kid at night, stealing or whatever the case might be, they would bring him here.

GOODSILL: The probation officer is a daytime job?

VELA: Yes, a daytime job. But the detention officer had a protocol when admitting a juvenile. Usually for the safety of the detention worker and everybody involved, we would ask the police officer to stay here until the juvenile was secured. These days, there's a lot more violence involved. At that time they were few and far between, we'd do our best to calm the kid down and put him in a cell and, of course, call the parents and let them know where their kid was and tell them where to be the following day for court.

GOODSILL: When a juvenile would be detained, what happens next in their lives?

VELA: If the juvenile is detained, he is required to go before the juvenile judge the next business day, or as soon as possible for a hearing. At that time, the judge would determine whether or not they could be detained or released to the parents. If there was a situation where it's not a good home situation or if it's a very serious crime and the protection of the community would require that he be detained, the juvenile would be detained ten days. At the end of those ten days, he'd have to go back to the judge because juveniles could only be detained ten days at a time. I don't know what the statute is now. This gave the judge time to see if the circumstances had changed at home and to give the probation officer a chance to investigate the crime.

If they could go home, they would be supervised by the probation officer and he would go back to court on a certain day so the judge could determine whether or not he would be placed on probation or be sent off to a facility.

GOODSILL: If he's at home, what's the job of the probation officer?

VELA: The probation officer would visit to make sure he or she was in school and the juvenile was going to counseling, if that was part of his condition, whether its drug counseling or psychiatric counseling. We involved the parents in the supervision and be in contact with them to make sure the kids were where they were supposed to be.

If there was a curfew, for example, we made sure the child and parents complied with that, basically, making sure the kid was staying out of trouble. I think the maximum term of probation was one year.

GOODSILL: Let's say it was one year and the kid has done everything that was needed done for one year. Then what?

VELA: Oh, he would be off probation at that termination date and he would not have to report anymore. He would go about his business.

GOODSILL: Any record that a child would have of a probation period?

VELA: There would be a juvenile record but those records are sealed. Nobody could just come in and say, "Is this guy on probation or juvenile probation?"

GOODSILL: It must have been pretty convenient to have the courthouse right down the road.

VELA: Well, yes. Juveniles would go to the County Court at Law. At one time it was on the bottom floor and then when the annex was built, juvenile courts moved there. Now, I think we have four County Courts at Law. If a juvenile committed a very serious crime and was certified as an adult, he would be certified at the County Court at Law and be remanded to district court.

GOODSILL: Is district court an adult court?

VELA: Yes. If a juvenile was certified as an adult because he committed a very serious crime, then he could be sentenced as an adult. At that time, he had to be fifteen years old. I think did I two of those in my time. There was a juvenile who killed his aunt and his uncle. There was another who committed a serious burglary and the people she was with killed a person. Both were pretty comprehensive investigations with a lot of testifying because the juvenile was going from juvenile court to adult.

GOODSILL: Another part of the probation officers job is testifying in court either in a positive manner or negative manner depending on the behavior of the child.

VELA: Correct, depending on the child.

GOODSILL: Let's go back to the other kid who's been remanded to state hearings ten days at a time. How long does that go on for?

VELA: Until there's an outcome. Until he's adjudicated as a delinquent child, depending on how soon the state and the defense attorney make a decisions on whether he's placed on probation or whether he's sent off. This is how it was from 1979 to the mid 1980's. I'm sure there have been a lot of changes in the juvenile law.

Adult Probation was housed in this building, right there (indicating the east end of the current building) on site. I see where the bars are still here. At the time I got hired, Mike Culpers was the chief. He's the one who hired me. Mike Humphries, Marcy Hall, and Mary Phillips were probation officers. I was the first male. I was pretty young back then and could relate to the kids and so could Mary and so could Marcy.

GOODSILL: It's important not to be gullible and to be able to hold a hard line.

VELA: Right. You also had to be very careful dealing with juveniles. Given what I know now, I would have done things differently. I was the only person transporting kids. I was in the probation business for over thirty-five years. The only time I felt threatened or was assaulted was when I was dealing with juveniles; never with adults. The juveniles are much more unpredictable; they can be very volatile.

GOODSILL: Desperate? Impulsive?

VELA: Correct. Very. Hindsight is 20-20. If I had the experience that I have now, those things would not have happened. I was twenty-two or twenty-three at the time. Being in the system this long and going into the federal system and then coming back to the County, I learned a lot. There was only one time that I ever felt threatened. I could run fast at the time and I had to chase them down. I remember one time there was a kid that had just been detained. I was at the hearing, so was the detention worker. I knew this kid was a "huffer" (a kid who used inhalants). They drew spray at the time or whatever they could get a hold of. He darted out the back door of the courthouse and I started chasing him. Although he ran faster than I did, I knew he was going to give out because he was "huffing". I had a few years under my belt so I knew what to watch for. I knew this kid was a "huffer" and I said to myself, "This guy's not going to be able to run two blocks." Sure enough, he didn't.

GOODSILL: What was the outcome for kids who were drug users?

VELA: We'd have them evaluated by a counselor to determine how serious their problem was. At that time we'd make a decision. Is this a person that can benefit from counseling and work in a group or with peers on how to deal with their substance abuse or is this kid an addict that really needs some housing and he should be in a residential facility? Psychiatrists and psychologists evaluated them. Based on that recommendation we would follow through with our recommendations.

Another thing you asked was what the function of the probation officer was. We had to write social histories, which were presentence reports for the court giving the child's social history, family dynamics, talk about the offense that got them here in the first place, or if they had a juvenile history. We'd collect school records, talk to counselors, and talk to teachers if we could. Then the court made the decision to sentence a juvenile to probation or to TYC.

GOODSILL: I imagine it was very important to the court.

VELA: Yes, our investigations would give the court direction on what would be best for the child. Sometimes we'd have to testify on the reasoning behind our recommendation even though it may have been in writing. If the defense attorney or the state wanted to get more testimony from the probation officer, we would be on the stand for a while. Also, after reviewing evaluations from drug counselors or evaluations from psychologists, we'd incorporate that into the social history.

At that time, we did not have any drug testing. It's more prevalent now because there's more drugs out there now, unfortunately. We would use surveillance... the smell of alcohol, watching their behavior or sometimes the officers would catch them and bring them in.

GOODSILL: What were the main drugs that were prevalent?

VELA: Marijuana with alcohol. I had a Masters Degree and I wrote my thesis comparing a group of Mexican-American juveniles that had been referred for probation, who were known to be "huffers", with another group of Mexican-American kids who had no records. I used Hirshi's bonding theories of how well they bond to certain values to see the dichotomy between both groups.

After I was in the juvenile system here in Fort Bend County I went to work for the adult system. Some of the kids' parents were in the adult system. I know now why the kid was messed up like that. Now I'm dealing with the parent.

GOODSILL: Are you saying that bonding and attachments with parents make a difference to a kid's outcome?

VELA: Yes. Attachments. Relationship attachments to prove social values.

GOODSILL: Social values. To family? To the court?

VELA: To criminal peers.

GOODSILL: Sometimes kids would attach to criminal peers as their primary bonding?

VELA: Correct.

GOODSILL: And the outcome there would be?

VELA: Well, a kid is more likely to stay out of trouble, be more conventional, stay in school if there is less dysfunction in the family. I'm sure other studies have looked at the same component of inhalant abuse. Using with any particular group or groups of individuals, like bonding, causes significant dysfunction in families and their abilities to cope under stress.

GOODSILL: Not to mention the neurological impairments. It may start out with some of the issues you're talking about and then it leads to other sets of problems with the family.

VELA: I went through all the proper authorizations with the kids parents because I had an instrument that I rated each group of kids on which dealt with those components. I was in graduate school at that time. I was able to finish my Master's program driving from here to Huntsville where my classes were. My supervisor was generous enough to allow me to flex my time because I would have to leave here at 3 o'clock to be at my 6 o'clock class. Then Sam Houston State University offered classes at the Houston Police Department so I was able to get some of those classes there and take advantage of a much shorter drive. But to complete my Master's thesis I was fortunate that I had a sample to work with. It was very worthwhile for me.

GOODSILL: Why did you move to adult probation?

VELA: Adult probation at that time was reorganizing. When I went in to work as an Adult Probation Officer, I went in as a supervisor. We were a small department back then.

GOODSILL: Where was Adult Probation in relation to this building?

VELA: Across the Sallie Port was another building. That's where Adult probation was and I think a constable was there, and there were a couple of gas pumps where the Sheriff's Department would gas up. That Sallie Port is where they would bring adult prisoners in here.

GOODSILL: Were the jail cells over there in adult probation?

VELA: No, no. They were just offices.

GOODSILL: So, how does adult work?

VELA: We supervised adult offenders who had committed crimes. They were placed on probation but were not in prison. They needed to be in jail because so they could be assessed. At that time it was anywhere from six months to ten years probation. During that time if they violated their conditions, or were not compliant, they could go to prison. If it was a misdemeanor case they would do their probation and thirty days to ninety days in the county jail as opposed to those who would go to the Texas Department of Corrections. Once that person got out, they would be on parole. They could come back and live in Fort Bend County but that would not be supervised by the probation officers.

GOODSILL: So once they get into the state system they're not part of the county? If they never go into the county system then they are the purview of the Adult Probation? I'm not counting the state system.

VELA: Back then we had some conditions. We got the evaluations and the substance abuse problems, anger management problems. We'd direct them to those resources to get help, to get the counseling to try to make them see that and hold them accountable. The adults would also pay probation fees whereas the juveniles did not.

GOODSILL: What are the probation fees? Not the amount. What is the purpose of it?

VELA: Probation fees help fund probation officers and the operations. It's a monthly fee.

GOODSILL: If you go into Adult Probation, you have to pay a monthly fee?

VELA: In addition to a fine. Sometimes if the judge imposes a fine, at the beginning, then that fine is paid to the District Clerk's Office. The court can also impose court costs. Every case has court costs.

GOODSILL: It works as a deterrent? They want to get out of the system and they want to get clean so they don't have to pay this money.

VELA: Correct. They idea is not to come into the system in the first place.

GOODSILL: What if they didn't have the money? What if they can't work because they lost their job?

VELA: At that time, we had just started community service. They could do community service in lieu of paying. If they lost their job they have a lot of free time, don't they? They could come in and do community service and knock some of that money off. Not all of them are able to work. I currently deal with a mental health caseload where a lot of people are disabled now. They're on probation. They have social anxieties that can affect their work or their work crew.

I became a supervisor with one of the units in Adult Probation and I stayed in Adult Probation from 1984 until 1991 when I went to work for the Federal Probation Office in Houston for the southern District of Texas. I retired from that in 2011. I was Assistant Deputy Chief in charge of Houston Operations. I retired for a few months and worked with the Attorney General's Office as an investigator for about five months. I got tired of driving to downtown Houston. I came back to Adult Probation, where I was from 1984 until 1991. In 1991 when I left, I was Assistant Director of Probation. I went to the federal system and started at the very bottom. I came back to Adult Probation and I was back at the bottom again.

That's the way it worked here. We had detention officers and probation officers. We transported the case to court and bring them back or the judge may have released them. Bring them back, get their stuff, clothes, the parents would be very happy and take them home. They were all fed here. Both Mary Phillips and Steve Monks were the chiefs at the time. It was a good operation. There was never any investigation or anybody got hurt. Kids fight but nobody got really hurt. It was a fun time to work here. When I look back on it, it was so different back then. Fort Bend probation departments were smaller. We knew everybody.

GOODSILL: It's different now because of the size of the population and the complexity of the problem?

VELA: My office is in the Rosenberg Annex, which used to be the old Walmart back in the day. That's where the probation office is housed but we also have satellite offices. We have one off of Beechnut, we have one in Sugar Land, and we have one in Fresno, Sanders. It's much more spread out.

I don't know what year it was that we moved from this small place that we had here. We moved to the jail across the street from the Justice Center where they have the Probate County Jail right now. Do you remember there used to be a VFW post there? The Probation Office was right across the street (from) the VFW post. There was a Constables Office there and the Probation Office was there. But then we started growing. This was between 1985, 1986. In 1987 we started hiring more officers. Then about 1990 we took over that VFW post. It was a hall. The county bought it, renovated it, (and) made offices. We started housing probation officers (there). That was about the time I left. A few years later they get this place.

GOODSILL: They moved all over the place.

VELA: Expanded, as we called the complex. It's been very important to me personally to be in Fort Bend County.

GOODSILL: You say some of the kids that you saw when you were in Juvenile ended up in the Adult system? This is what we want to avoid. Sometimes it's not avoided.

VELA: As a Juvenile Probation Officer, I had many kids under my caseload. I don't remember them. Chances are they only had one Probation Officer and that was ME. "You're Mr. Vela, right? You used to be my P. O." I had so many but he remembers his one and only Juvenile Probation Officer.

GOODSILL: Does he usually remember with a good feeling?

VELA: It was okay. He was in a good mood maybe that day. I'll see them out in public and they'll say, "Hey, you used to be my Juvenile Probation Officer." I used to have a lot of kids under supervision.

GOODSILL: It was a life altering experience for them.

VELA: Yes. There's a hand full of kids and two that I remember in particular that wound up in the system . I still remember them as juveniles.

GOODSILL: And their personality and interests don't seem significantly different now?

VELA: No, they don't. One interesting kid used to be a "huffer". He was in my study also. I ran into him in the adult system. He could not function. He was on probation. He was like a "zombie". Because the brain turns to Jell-o. He could not carry on a conversation; could not remember things.

GOODSILL: Still "huffing"?

VELA: No, probably doing other things. They're self-medicating, finding things to do. I'm bilingual. I was only the second bilingual person in the courthouse. I used to be called to interpret in district court when I was at Juvenile. I used to interpret for attorneys in presenting their cases to the court and defendants. I used to be an interpreter. I was not a certified interpreter. I couldn't get away with that now. My Spanish was good. It still is. Being a court interpreter requires a lot of education. It's very difficult. I couldn't pass the test. It's very difficult in Spanish. It's extremely difficult to become a certified interpreter because of the different dialects in Spanish.

GOODSILL: Is that right?

VELA: Yes. That's what impressed me most about the interpreters I used to work with. In the federal system when we interviewed defendants for pre-sentencing investigation reports that I would prepare for the federal courts, the defense attorney was always present. A lot of times with drug smugglers, Columbians, Mexicans, etc., they would have to be present and I would have to have an interpreter present. I would be asking the questions in English and the interpreter would interpret to the defendant and to the attorney.

GOODSILL: Even though you could understand.

VELA: Yes, even though I could understand.

GOODSILL: So it was a double check? (LAUGHS)

VELA: I came to know a couple of interpreters very well. They showed me their exam and what they had to go through to know two languages because Spanish has different dialects. The term in Columbia isn't the same as the term in Mexico, or Venezuela.

GOODSILL: Do you do much of your work in Spanish now?

VELA: I do some of it. Other officers would call me just down the hallway, "Hey, can you come and interpret?" Or I get this phone call to interpret. I'll do that for a fellow officer.

GOODSILL: When you first came here what would you say the ethnic breakdown was in Juvenile?

VELA: In Juvenile it was a diversified group. The language wasn't really that much of a problem. About 90 to 95 percent of them spoke English because they were here. It was very unusual if I had Juvenile the was non-English speaking. Their parents may not speak a lick of English, but the kids did.

GOODSILL: How many Hispanics, how many blacks, how many Asians, how many Caucasians?

VELA: In the Juvenile, I would think that it was mostly Caucasian. If I was to throw out the percentages, maybe thirty Hispanic, thirty black, and the rest Caucasian.

GOODSILL: The population has changed.

VELA: Now it's so diverse. A lot more Asians now that I've seen.

GOODSILL: In Adult, as well?

VELA: Yes ma'am. I don't know what the Juvenile population is now but at that time, it was predominantly Caucasian, Hispanic, and black.

GOODSILL: And the population of the county has changed.

VELA: Yes, absolutely. It's much more diverse now than what it was back then.

GOODSILL: Thank you for this interview!

Interview Ends