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El Pasoans share WWII experiences with students

By David Peregrino
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As a video camera rolled, 86-year-old Robert Leyva spoke about living through the Depression, fighting in the Battle of the Bulge, and returning from the war to coach and teach at El Paso schools until the 1980s.

Leyva was one of about a dozen El Pasoans who were interviewed Saturday for the University of Texas at Austin's United States Latino and **Latina** World War II **Oral History** Project.

Students from UT-Austin's School of Journalism interviewed the men and women at the Veterans Outreach Center at 9500 Boeing.

Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, assistant professor of journalism at the university, said the project documents the experiences of Latinos who lived through the World War II era.

"If you read books about the Depression, or what was going on on the battlefield or homefront during World War II, you're hard-pressed to find stories about Latinos," Rivas-Rodriguez said. "You can't tell the story of our nation without Latinos."

More than 160 people have been interviewed since the project began in 1999, she said. The project's goal is to interview more than 200 Latinos by 2003, she said.

The project has already publicized some of the men's and women's experiences through "Narratives: Stories of U.S. Latinos and Latinas and World War II," a newspaper published each semester by the journalism students.

To find people to interview, the project works with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and several universities around the country.

The University of Texas at El Paso is one of the project's regional partners.

After interviews are catalogued and archived over the next few years, they will be stored at the UTEP Institute of **Oral History** and two UT-Austin libraries for use by researchers and the public, Rivas-Rodriguez said.

Kristine Navarro, director of the UTEP Institute of **Oral History**, said the UT-Austin project would be a welcome addition to the institute's archives.

Rivas-Rodriguez said students are looking for Latinos who served in the Merchant Marine during World War II and for "women who were doing jobs that were open to them because the men had gone off to war," she said.

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UTEP Institute of **Oral History** at 747-7052 or www.utexas.edu/projects/latinoarchives
Photo Caption: Andrea R. Williams, a junior at the University of Texas at Austin, interviewed Robert Leyva Saturday at the Veterans Outreach Center in El Paso about his experiences during World War II. UTEP and UT-Austin are collecting oral histories focusing on the war's impact on Latinos.
