

Former Chavez Student Returns to Motivate Students Just Like Him

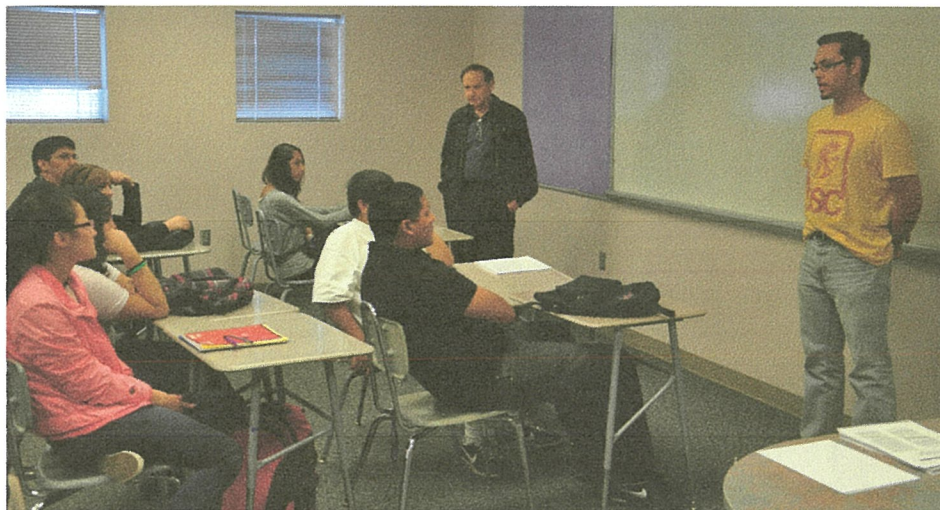
Charles Barkley wasn't very comfortable with being a role model, but Jose Elias doesn't mind it one bit. In fact, the former Cesar Chavez student boarded a late night bus in Los Angeles, arriving at 4:30 a.m. in Phoenix on a February Monday just to meet with some Phoenix Union students who are taking enrichment classes to help with their reading and writing. He came at the invitation of Gene Fazio, a retired community college professor who is tutoring literacy enrichment classes at Central and Cesar Chavez High Schools.

Elias isn't an NBA superstar, but he is a superstar in his own right. Three years ago he was homeless in a strange town, struggling to learn English in a beginning ELL class. Now he is a freshman at the University of Southern California on a \$250,000 scholarship, studying to be a neurosurgeon. If he can do it, anyone can.

"I hope I can motivate students. Most of them were born here and speak the language. I didn't have those advantages. But where there is a will, there is a way. Anything is possible. You have to have a vision, and see it through, and work hard to reach your goals."

Elias was born in Nogales, Arizona, but grew up in Nogales, Mexico, attending Mexican schools and speaking only Spanish. Not able to afford high school tuition in Mexico, he left his family for Phoenix to stay with a step great-grandmother. When some money was discovered missing in the house, the woman blamed Elias and kicked him out of the house. Caring teachers at Cesar Chavez helped with living arrangements in several locations, including a foster home, and he finally found refuge with a housing program called Open Hands, when he was 18. Within six months, he had moved from a pre-emergent ELL class and was enrolling in honors math and science classes.

He came to an afterschool tutoring



Elias (at right) meets with Cesar Chavez students.

program to help with his reading and writing and Fazio, who was conducting the tutoring, saw the potential and made him a tutor.

"He went through this program and it helped him a lot," Fazio explained to the class. "When you teach, you learn twice. Jose went from reading at the 3rd grade level to an academic scholarship."

Elias said, "I doubted myself, and never thought I would go to college, but I attended a summer program at a community college with a \$1,000 scholarship, and another for those interested in the health care field. I did pretty well on my SAT test. One day I received an envelope that said on the cover that I was a candidate in good standing for a top tier university. It looked like an advertisement, but it was a scholarship opportunity. I still have that letter."

It was from QuestBridge, a non-profit organization that links high-achieving students from low-income backgrounds to top universities. Elias applied and earned a full scholarship to USC.

Now he is taking chemistry, cellular biology, psychology and statistics. His major is neuroscience with a minor in psychology, and he is working toward medical school. He works two jobs, as an exam proctor and a transportation facilitator helping the disabled and homeless

community in Los Angeles. Just as amazing as the rest of his story, Elias joined the USC Trojan Marching Band and started playing the clarinet, even though he had never had any formal music training.

"My motivation is my family. I come from a poor family in Mexico. I have two little sisters. I want to help my family, and I send them money. I really don't want my little sisters to go through what I did," Elias said.

Fazio echoes

Elias' sentiments to his class.

"If you don't do it for yourself, or you don't do it to make your parents proud, at least, do it for your kids."

"Many students fail because they don't

try. They don't try, because they are afraid of failing. There is less stigma if you fail by not trying, than if you try, and fail. We want them to just do the work, and we can show them success," Fazio said.

Elias said "I knew

I needed to be literate if I want to have a voice and be a productive member of society. In America, there is freedom, but there are still injustices. If I become a surgeon, I will have a more important voice, and will be able to do more for society."

"Because Jose got something special out of his education, I wanted him to share that with other young people. And he wanted to come back and contribute," said Fazio.

It was a good homecoming for Jose Elias. He got back on the bus that evening, arriving at USC in time for his classes Tuesday morning. He hopes this grueling trip, like his life journey, will inspire others to succeed.

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TESTING UPDATE

April is testing month for PUHSD students. AIMS Math is April 10 for all 10th graders and any 11th or 12th graders who have not passed the Math test.

AIMS Science is April 11. All juniors take the ACT College Entrance Exam for free on April 24.