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UNIVERSITY

Student group's founder still learning

By Christopher Blair
Emerald Managing Editor

In 1967, Jesus Estrada would have been perfectly satisfied working as a mechanic.

"Where I was coming from I had reached all my goals," said Estrada, now working on his doctorate in education at the University. "I was working. I could wear a uniform that they provided. I wasn't working in the fields; that was a big deal."

When he was growing up in the 1960s, Estrada's family worked as migrant farm laborers, which kept them on the move from state to state. Along the way, school records got lost. Estrada's parents could not speak English well enough to vouch for his academic skills, and he was being held back at new schools.

In 1967, 18 years old and in the ninth grade, Estrada quit school. He had worked in a gas station in his home of Weiser, Idaho, and wanted to get his General Education Diploma to qualify for work on cars.

Estrada came to the University that summer as a participant in the first year of the High School Equivalency program, still thinking of being a mechanic.

But by the time he left the University in 1971, Estrada had been elected to the Student Senate, founded the Chicano Student Union (now known as MEChA), and helped his fellow HEP students as a student teacher.

"It was a radical thing for me," he said. "I had dropped out of school. I hated teachers. There was no one in the world I hated worse than teachers."

Estrada said that during his time at the University, he realized that it wasn't all teachers



Jesus Estrada

he disagreed with, but those who "weren't student-centered," or who came from racist or elitist backgrounds and couldn't understand the needs of individual students.

In the 23 years since he first arrived in Eugene, Estrada earned his master's in bilingual education from the University, and worked as a teacher and counselor in Portland, Salem and Woodburn, often with students of migrant families. He also served on the school board in Salem.

HEP students in the program's first year were given three terms to earn their GED, something Estrada accomplished in one. It gave him the opportunity to take University classes and see the campus.

Hispanic and Chicano students were being asked as individuals about their opinions on social issues, making the CSU necessary, Estrada said.

"We found that we were going to have to get our thoughts together if we were going to represent the Chicano community," he said.

Estrada went before the Incidental Fee Committee for money for the group, and was granted not only operating funds, but an office, which now is occupied by the Breeze-way Cafe.

In the CSU's first year, it brought farmworker advocate Cesar Chavez to campus and helped organized a Poor Peoples' March from Eugene to Salem. In the early 70s, the group became a chapter in the national student group Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanos de Aztlan, and remains a MEChA group today.

Through his years as a teacher and a student, Estrada has worked on ways to better teach students who are floundering in this country's educational system. He said part of the problem is the use of and belief in the term "at-risk youth."

"I think it's an 'at-risk institution,'" he said. "They do not deal with student needs. I think that's extended to the upper-middle class white student, too, now, because they're 'making the decision to leave.'"

"It's funny for the minority student, because they 'drop out.' For upper-middle class students, they 'make the decision to leave.' The point is, the system is not meeting the needs of the students."

Estrada said his school was simply not meeting his needs, and that he's glad he dropped out. By the time his class had graduated high school, Estrada had two and a half years of college credit.

"It was an opportunity I'm grateful for," he said. "The movement of change in the '60s was real helpful in providing a lot of opportunities, a lot of awareness, to everyone."



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