

A legacy of learning

"The word was the ember and the forest was my life."

— Jimmy Santiago Baca

We're at the Flip 'n Chicken sharing food, swapping stories about El Paso and philosophizing about what it means to be an educator in the Early Childhood program at Oregon Coast Community College.

His looks are a cross between Lee Trevino (golfer from El Paso) and my buddy the muralist from El Paso, Mario Colin.

"My hope is that I can influence high school students to become teachers . . . to be better teachers . . . go to grad school . . . get a master's degree, get a doctoral. My biggest pleasure would be to see that student who obtained a certificate from Oregon Coast

Community College come back to replace me," says Oscar Juarez, faculty member in early childhood education at OCCC.

As the day unfolds, Oscar

leads me from his faculty office to the Flip 'n Chicken to meet Marco and Ana, the proprietors of the small eatery. For Marco and Oscar, this modest Mexican-styled restaurant serving chicken wings and all-day breakfasts is a hub of activity for the Latino community in Newport and beyond.

The journey here for his wife, Teresa, and five children, aged 11 to 22, is a cultural/intellectual/spiritual roadmap he has plotted for his entire life. Leaving a huge metropolitan area with more than 90 percent Hispanic population in El Paso and several million Mexicans right across the border in Juarez, to this almost alien quasi-barren place called the Central Oregon Coast has galvanized into him the word "significant."

In November 2019, he marked his first year at OCCC.

Family legacy

The legacy of his Mexican roots planted in this country — historically in large part the sanctum of Mexico (or New Spain) for hundreds of years — is still tended carefully.

His parents met in Ciudad Juarez. Oscar's father, Jesus Juarez, was from Guanajuato and his mother, Maria Guadalupe, from

Zacatecas. His mother had a third-grade education, and his father went to college and obtained a business degree while living in Mexico City. Neither spoke English when they arrived to Juarez, Chihuahua.

Soon, a carpet tienda opened up — Alfombras Juarez, quickly followed by a sister store in El Paso. Oscar and four of his brothers were born in El Paso. The fifth brother was born in Juarez after their mother went into labor which necessitated giving birth in Mexico.

For Oscar, their humble beginnings set in motion his own ethos of caring for family and appreciating the little things in life — the gulls, the seals in Waldport where he lives, all the vegetation foreign to a Chihuahua native.

However, it doesn't take much to precipitate pride in his own country's history of struggle, and his own belief in the common good of all people, no matter the national borders set down.

Family unity

We talk about gangs in El Paso, groups I am familiar with since I was both a college/university instructor who also taught in alternative programs tied to gang activity reduction. Oscar grew up with both parents in the household, and their home was part of two other residences — aunts and uncles with their own broods of five and six children each.

He attributes that cohesion as to why he, his siblings and cousins never got involved in gangs or drugs.

"Where I grew up, one block east was the Barrios San Juan gang. One block west, the Fatherless gang. Two blocks north, the Diablo Sherman gang."

He's quick to dispel the racist banter about Latinos and gangs. "You can't judge a book by its cover. Here is one gang, Diablo Sherman, which came from a rundown housing project . . . they were never given a chance. With both parents working night and day. So, what other outlet do teenagers have? These gangs give them a sense of belonging."

He admits there was pressure to join a gang, but he stifled that by becoming a diplomat, making friends with individuals from every gang.

Given the tightknit family, the young Oscar had many dreams of what he wanted to be when he grew up. One dream was to become an astronaut. He had aspirations for military life, even wanting to join the army when the Gulf War began.

Life hit him like ice water to the face



several times, the first one being the death of his father when he was killed by a hit-and-run driver in Juarez when the family was there for a quinceanera.

His mother was 38 years old left alone to raise six boys.

Learning to persevere

"That's when my impediment started," Oscar says. This is one form of trauma precipitated by witnessing his old man die — stuttering, or stammering. "My siblings went to counseling after our father's death. I was so young I guess they thought I didn't need to get counseling."

His family was wrong about that. Consequently, his family believed Oscar was faking the stammering, or that he was imitating a cousin who stuttered.

"It's been a blessing for me. It changed my attitude. It made me realize others' suffering, and to put myself into other people's shoes."

The "it" is more than a speech challenge/disability — he sees life as a process of challenging any individual to live outside the box.

He was evaluated in fourth grade, received an IEP (Individualized Education Plan), and a speech therapist. For Oscar, during his senior year, the therapist told him his plans for the future — Air Force Academy — were not typical of others with this impediment. "She was telling me how much strength I had by not letting this limit my life, my dreams."

"I took it as a challenge. I never wanted the easy road. It would have been easier to just shy away from public speaking events. I was fortunate I had a few good teachers who made the difference for me."

Teaching is in his blood

It was Oscar's family of five children — Clara, 22; Yasmine, 21; Jesus, 18; Oscar, 14;

Alicia, 11 — and his wife who chose Newport over a more lucrative offer of an associate professorship at New Mexico State University, his grad school alma mater in Carlsbad — still close to his large clan in El Paso.

"Let's get out of our comfort zone," Teresa said. "We've been playing it safe for so long, let's gamble."

That gamble means a win-win to the third power for Newport. He says he is really motivated to help transform Oregon Coast Community College into "the community's school."

His multicultural class is helping early childhood instructors see their students' lives through a broader and multifaceted lens and narrative frame. "I feel I have to be more of an advocate for the college. Being here does provide me with a venue. I want this college to be more inclusive. I tell my students, 'This is your community college. I am only a steward of the college.'"

He's all about teaching, even though he was headed for an academy, which didn't work out. He was a chemistry major at UT-El Paso. He was one semester away from heading to a lab. That didn't work out.

In fact, Oscar Juarez's presence in Newport — as he spreads his knowledge, passion and inspiration — is largely because he dropped out of college to take care of an ailing mother. In doing so, he worked odd jobs, including custodian at a Head Start in El Paso. And that's when the teaching bug hit him hard.

...

Read on, as Deep Dive continues at www.oregoncoasttoday.com

Paul Haeder is a writer living and working in Lincoln County. He has two books coming out, one a short story collection, "Wide Open Eyes: Surfacing from Vietnam," and a non-fiction book, "No More Messing Around: The Good, Bad and Ugly of America's Education System."

