

LEARNING WHO YOU ARE

High school students seek out their identities BY JORDAN RICH

JOHANIS TADEO STANDS BEFORE A MURAL AT CALC PAINTED BY HIS STUDENTS

PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER

If you teach ethnic studies to students, teach them about their culture, get them involved, they start caring more about their education and are able to succeed,” says Johanis Tadeo, organizer of Springfield/Eugene’s City Wide MEChA and community organizer at Community Alliance of Lane County.

Tadeo organizes for the local chapter of Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán, a nation-wide student-run organization. MEChA focuses on education and history, specifically Chicano history — a curriculum that isn’t taught in most classrooms.

“I was contacted by a student a year ago, around this time, they were talking about how they were facing a lot of racism and discrimination,” Tadeo says. Meeting the Latino students at Thurston High School was life changing. The students had no support at all and didn’t know what their identities were, he says.

Tadeo was later contacted by students at Springfield, Willamette and Churchill high schools as well as Briggs and Cascade middle schools — and all, he says, were facing similar problems. So he decided to expand the Thurston program to City Wide MEChA to accommodate these students.

“We have a center thanks to the Church of Brethren, which lets us use their facility. Upstairs we have an office as well as a library and a game room,” Tadeo says. “We offer tutoring services, we help them with math, science and history. We also teach classes there. We create a safe space there that feels welcoming — where they can be themselves and express a lot of their issues and concerns.”

Tadeo may be the perfect fit for this job, because, he says, he has been facing the same issues his entire life.

Tadeo has lived in Springfield since he was three years old and says he has faced problems with racism and his own identity. “We lived in poverty, and for a while we lived in our car.” But once the family was finally able to get an apartment, “this woman heard us speak Spanish and assumed that we were undocumented.”

This was during the immigration raids in the '90s, “where immigration just came in and started grabbing people,” Tadeo says. “They grabbed my father and he got

taken away. So, my mom raised us. Raising three boys on her own and working three jobs, she didn’t really have time for us.”

It was at Guy Lee Elementary that his first name was changed. “My name was taken away,” he says. Instead of Johanis, he was called “Jony.”

“They told me that Johanis wasn’t American, and Jony was going to be my new name,” he remembers. “I asked my teacher, ‘How do you spell Jony?’ She told me to spell it however you can, so I spelled it J-o-n-y.”

He was made fun of for it.

“I remember hating my own skin to a point where I would try to cut the brown off me,” Tadeo continues. “So now I have to live with these scars.” He shows the discolored areas on his forearms caused by the injuries.

Despite his experiences, Tadeo considers himself one of the lucky ones. His two brothers were brilliant kids. One of them got a full ride scholarship to play football for UCLA; the other one, for UO. “One ended up taking his life, and the other one’s incarcerated. There’s always these incidents because we are always trying to find our identity,” Tadeo says.

When you can’t find your own identity, he says, then you look at stereotypes to tell you what your identity is, and then you become that stereotype and perpetuate that very idea.

Tadeo attended a summer program called Puertas Abiertas that’s run by Jim Garcia, the Chicano/Latino student program coordinator at LCC. “It was like a seed that he gave me. I didn’t know we were indigenous ... I

ANTHONY ORTEGA TEACHING ALEX TADEO A SONG AT THE CHURCH OF BRETHREN

