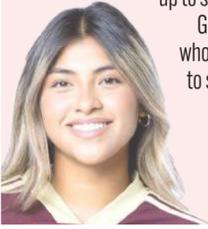


Sports

Remarkable Leadership

Players and coaches look up to soccer captain Gialli Francisco who led the effort to save women's basketball.



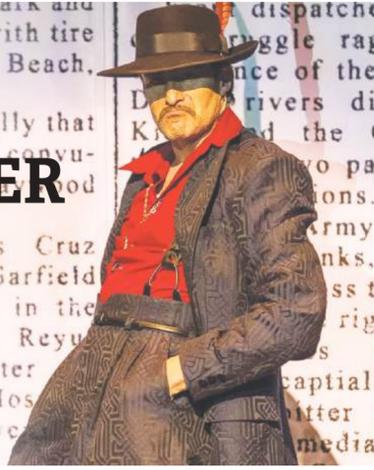
Story Page 11

Arts

GODFATHER OF CHICANO THEATER

Groundbreaking playwright and film director Luis Valdez wants a new generation to pick up his torch.

Read the full story, Page 10



Campus

Debate Team Talk of U.S.

Transfronterizos lead the way to a national title. Story Page 8



NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENT UNION SHEDS LIGHT ON MISSING WOMEN, STORY PAGE 8

THE SUN

SOUTHWESTERN COLLEGE

AN ACP HALL OF FAME NEWSPAPER

MAY 31, 2024 / ISSUE 5

A NATIONAL PACEMAKER AWARD NEWSPAPER

EDUCATION LIBERATES DONOVAN PRISON INMATES

BY CAMILA A. GONZALES, JOSE GUZMAN AND HOLDEN AMES

DONOVAN STATE PRISON, OTAY MESA—

Shawn Khalifa's life was essentially over.

A life sentence in prison eliminates hope and exterminates dreams.

Education, he found, can reanimate both.

The Southwestern College Restorative Justice program has restored lives, said Khalifa, and shown people who made bad choices as youth that a college degree can open doors.

Including doors with iron bars. More than 2 million people in the United States are incarcerated, including about 90,000 in California. Several hundred are locked up in Donovan State Prison in Otay Mesa, a pitiless maximum security facility that houses some notorious felons, including Sirhan Sirhan, the assassin of Senator Robert F. Kennedy.

From the bleak grey walls light can shine. Patrice Milkovich and Raquel Fuentes lit a lantern of learning that has burned there since 2016.

Taking learning into a gritty state prison is the ultimate win-win, said Milkovich. For decades research has consistently shown that illiteracy is a leading predictor of criminal behavior and incarceration. Poorly educated members of society too often feel shut out of the economic structure and turn to crime, according to studies. Providing prisoners with educational opportunities is the most effective way to prevent recidivism.

"Education is the greatest form of rehabilitation," said Milkovich. "It changes the perception of a

RESTORATIVE • PG 3



Photo Courtesy of Ko Inouye



HONORARY DEGREE RECIPIENT

Retired ESL Professor Angelina Stuart was president of the Academic Senate during a crisis in 2010-11 that threatened the college's accreditation. Stuart led a team of faculty and administrators who restored accreditation and kept the college operating. She was recognized at commencement as the 2024 recipient of the Southwestern College Honorary Degree.

WALKING THE WALK—More than 800 students who earned Associate's degrees or certificates were honored during the 2024 commencement in DeVore Stadium.

¡ORALE!

Record numbers of students celebrate commencement

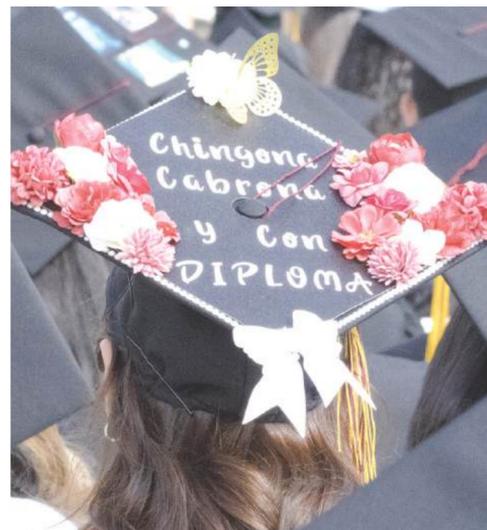


PHOTO BY YANELLI Z. ROBLES

HEAR ME ROAR!—Scores of students modified their mortar boards with art or inspiring statements.

Success has outgrown the football stadium. With more than 800 students walking at this year's commencement celebration, college officials for the second straight year decided to hold morning and afternoon ceremonies in order to fit all the spectators. It was a good call. The morning event filled about half the stadium while the p.m. ceremony was about 75 percent full.

A separate ceremony was held in Tijuana for transfronterizo students and their families. There was also, for the first time ever, a special Raza Graduation for Chicano students that was held on the main campus. MEChA students had lobbied for the raza ceremony for several years.

"It is lovely to see so many wonderful students celebrating this special day," said Honorary Degree recipient Professor Angelina Stuart. "So many bright futures awaiting them."

ANALYSIS

DIZZYING TURNOVER CRIPPLES COLLEGE

Long careers in the top rungs of college leadership are becoming increasingly unusual in America

BY ALEXA LUNA AND BLANCA ESTHELA CASTAÑEDA GARCÍA

As the average length of time community college presidents serve grows shorter and shorter, the list of problems generated by "Churn" grows longer and longer.

Data is alarming.

Lifelong careers at one college have been replaced by careerism with ambitious or incompetent administrators skipping around the state (or the nation). Dizzying turnover rates have kept the revolving door spinning like a desk fan.

Academic journals like the Chronicle of Higher Education have begun to focus more attention on the problem of churn. Southwestern College is, unfortunately, a textbook case. Southwestern is 60 years old and has had 14 presidents. In the last 22 years it has had 11 presidents. By comparison Palomar College has had 14 presidents in 78 years. During one 30-year stretch Palomar had just two presidents. San Diego Mesa College, according to its website, has had just five presidents since opening in 1964 (serving an average of 12 years).

Presidencies have grown shorter with time, according to studies by the Community College League of California and the Chronicle of Higher Education. Lengthy presidencies at a single college like Dr. George Boggs (20 years) and Dr. Robert Deegan (10 years) at Palomar College, and Dr. Constance Carroll (11 years president of Mesa College, 17 years as chancellor of the San Diego Community College District) and Chester DeVore (17 years at Southwestern) seem to be a thing of the past. San Diego County longevity

CHURN • PG 2

Southwestern College has had 11 presidents in the past 22 years, all of whom were fired or quit without finishing their contracts.

Vice presidents turn over at an even faster rate leaving senior leadership in a near constant state of churn.



SOUTHWESTERN SUPERMAN

Super writer J. Michael Straczynski is one of America's greatest science-fiction authors and a beloved Southwestern alumnus. B Section

CHURN

• CONT FROM PG 1

Turnover destroys the institutional memory of college

rates have plunged from 12 years or more in the 20th century to less than five years today.

Nationally the average has slipped from 8.5 years in 2006 to 6.5 in 2016 to 5 in 2023. In California from 2000-2010 the average length of a community college presidency was 6.9 years. By 2020 it was 5.1 years. By 2023 it has slipped into the 4-5 year range. Current presidents who responded to a Chronicle survey indicated they expected to spend less than five years at their college. More than 70 percent said they do not train a successor.

Southwestern's first president, DeVore, served 17 years before retiring of his own volition in 1981. Remarkably, he is the only Southwestern president to retire as scheduled of his own free will. Every other president was fired, forced to resign or quit before their contract was up. That is a total of 13 presidents since 1981. Since 2002 no Southwestern College president has served more than 4.5 years. The average is 2.0 years.

Vice presidents turn over at an even faster rate at Southwestern. Presidents who want their own people on the second line of the management chart often encourage turnover of the VPAA as well as vice presidents for business affairs and student services. Some faculty complain the vice presidents turn over so quickly they cannot even keep track of current office holders.

"Southwestern College does go through lots of leadership changes," said Mark Sisson, Professor of Film, Television and Media Arts since 2003. "The general sense is that the administrators are here for themselves. They're here to take care of their own pockets and reputations. Eventually they move on as opposed to being invested in the life of this community, our students, faculty and staff."

Southwestern has had at least three close calls with losing its accreditation or takeover by the state (2009, 2011, 2016), each time during a period of unstable leadership. The college has been reprimanded by either the California Community Chancellor's Office, and state or federal accreditation bodies since 1999.

Churn was at the roots of the problems each time, according to senior college employees.

Research by the Harvard Business Journal and the Chronicle of Higher Education concluded that leadership churn demoralizes employees and erodes the foundations of institutions. Too many new leaders with little or no institutional knowledge come in and conduct damaging reorganizations that the Harvard Business Journal called "power grabs that almost never improve the organization. Reorganizations are anathema to American businesses and institutions."

Professor of Speech Communication Eric Maag said Southwestern has been knocked off course by leadership churn and damaging reorganizations going back to 2006 following the sudden resignation of Norma Hernandez. Southwestern's debate team – one of only two Southwestern College academic programs to ever bring home a national championship – is battered by churn and the whims of new administrators who have no institutional knowledge.

"It can be hard to figure out streams of new administrators who all have different priorities," he said. "The debate team is aware that it is not a conventional class that generates huge amounts of revenue by enrolling 30 students every semester. Every time a new vice president of academic affairs comes in, they look at us and say 'Oh, is this money well spent?' and they will question the existence of the program. We have had new presidents try to cut our funding. We've had vice presidents say that if

Southwestern College has suffered more than two decades of rapid turnover, known as "churn" among academic researchers. The last 22 years have seen 11 presidents in the top job. Presidents have been fired or resigned due to criminal activity, sexual misconduct, threatening employees, racial tension and mental health issues. Only one Southwestern College president retired of his own volition after completing a contract, and that was the very first one, Chester DeVore, in 1981. The average length of college presidencies has slipped from 8.5 years in 2006 to less than 5 years in 2023. Southwestern's average presidency since 2002 is 2.0 years. Dr. Mark Sanchez has been a relative pillar of stability. He has completed about 3.5 years and is under contract for another year and a half.

RECORD CHURN RATE DAMAGES COLLEGE

INSTABILITY IS THE NORM



COLLEGE PRESIDENT

Dr. Mark Sanchez, Southwestern's current president, started in February 2021 after Murillo's surprise departure. He is coming up on 3.5 years in office and recently inked a new two-year contract extension. He currently has the stated support of four of Southwestern's five governing board members, who are his bosses.



"The general sense is that the administrators are here for themselves. Eventually they move on as opposed to being invested in the life of this community, our students, faculty and staff."

MARK SISSON

Professor of Film, Television and Media Arts



"It can be hard to figure out streams of new administrators who all have different priorities."

ERIC MAAG

Professor of Speech Communication



"Turnover happens when there is no confidence in the president. When you have the right president, leadership is doing its job. When you don't, things can fly off the track."

ROBERT MORENO

Trustee

we don't improve the way they want us to, they're going to cancel us."

Maag said he is nervous that yet another new VPAA is scheduled to start on July 15. He and other forensics faculty said they have no idea what is coming next.

"For instance, our former VPAA Minou Spradley was extremely hands-on," he said. "We met with her frequently and she always listened. She did not try to change us, but rather she listened to us and helped us to make good decisions. She was very collaborative, willing to change her position if it was based on collaboration and what we wanted (for students)."

The most recent VPAA, Isabel Saber, was much the opposite, Maag said, which led to upheaval for debate and many other programs. Saber got the job after Spradley "retired." Six months later Spradley was VPAA at San Diego City College alongside two other former Southwestern VPs.

"That kind of gives you an idea of the turmoil within our leadership ranks," he said.

Southwestern's last president, Dr. Kindred Murillo, also left the college for a phantom "retirement." Murillo bailed out six months before the end of her contract citing "mental fatigue" and other stressors Southwestern College had saddled her with that she freely shared in regular global emails to employees. About four months later she was the president of Santa Barbara City College.

"We are a stepping stone," said Sisson, a sentiment shared by many employees interviewed for this story.

"We are also a last resort," said another veteran professor. "Southwestern has been whipsawed by people with talent on the way up and people who were ineffective in their previous positions on their way down. Those are the ones that really cause damage. (Raj) Chopra was a prime example. If HR had done even a modicum of research into his background that man would have never been hired. He had a very troubled track record and we hired him anyway."

Southwestern's administrative churn rate increases the college's

chances of landing an ineffective president or vice president.

"It's simple math," said the veteran professor. "When you plow through so many people you are bound to hit a really bad one once in a while."

SHARING POWER – OR NOT

California community colleges were established with a structure that calls for "shared governance" between administration and faculty. The poorly defined concept of shared governance in the California Education Code has led to decades of battles between faculty and administrators with differing interpretations. Former Southwestern College presidents Norma Hernandez and Denisse Whittaker were highly collaborative leaders who worked well with faculty, according to former Academic Senate President Angelina Stuart. Others, notably Chopra, Jewell E. Stint and Melinda Nish, were not at all collaborative, according to faculty leaders.

"This college would be in much better shape today if we had held on to Norma and Denise," the senior professor said. "No one is perfect, but they at least made it a priority to collaborate. They seemed to understand that many brains attacking a problem is always better than one."

Dr. Mark Sanchez, Southwestern's current president, started in February 2021 after Murillo's surprise departure. He is coming up on 3.5 years in office and recently inked a new two-year contract extension. He currently has the stated support of four of Southwestern's five governing board members, who are his bosses.

Trustee Robert Moreno, 38, was News Editor of The Sun in the mid-2000s and has kept his eye on the college ever since as a journalist, city council aide and elected official. Southwestern had some "marginal to very bad" presidents earlier this century, but said he thinks the college is in a period of effective, stable leadership.

"Turnover happens when there is no confidence in the president," he said. "When you have the right president, leadership is doing its job. When you don't, things can fly off the track."

Southwestern College Presidents Through the Years: The Good, The Bad, The Ugly

- **Chester DeVore** (1964-1981, 17 years) (retired voluntary)
- **Jewell E. Stint** (July 1981 – November 1986, 5.5 years) (fired)
- **Dr. Joseph Conte** (1987 – August 1997, 11 years) (forced to retire following a secret payment to a terminated VP)
- **Dr. Serafin Zasueta** (August 1997 – 2002, 4.5 years) (fired for illegally using public funds for a bond campaign)
- **Norma Hernandez** (2003 – July 2006, 3.5 years) (resigned in protest when governing board overruled her hire of a new VPAA and hired its own)
- **Dr. Neil Yonegi** (July 2006 – January 2007 six months) (fired)
- **Greg Sandoval** (January 2007 – July 2007, six months) (resigned rather than be fired)
- **Raj Chopra** (July 2007 – November 2010, 3.5 years) (resigned hours before a new governing board could fire him)
- **Dr. Angelica Suarez** (acting, December 2010 – February 2011, three months)
- **Denisse Whittaker** (February – December 2011, 1 year) (not rehired)
- **Dr. Melinda Nish** (January 2012 – June 2016, 4.5 years) (resigned rather than be fired)
- **Dr. Robert Deegan** (July 2016 – December 2016) (interim)
- **Dr. Kindred Murillo** (January 2017 – February 2021, 4 years) (resigned prior to completion of contract)
- **Dr. Mark Sanchez** (February 2021 – present, 3.3 years) (contracted through 2025)

Mark Sisson Photo Courtesy of Mark Sisson, Eric Maag Photo Courtesy of Eric Maag, Robert Moreno Photo Courtesy of SC



Photos Courtesy of Ko Inouye

KNOWLEDGE IS FREEDOM—Graduates of the UC Irvine restorative justice program that partners with Southwestern College. Incarcerated people who complete college courses are much less likely to repeat offend.

RESTORATIVE

• CONT FROM PG 1

Southwestern embraces its role as the 'University of Second Chances'

person's worth and it helps improve public safety. Education improves safety inside prisons. People taking college courses inside prison do not want to blow the opportunity because it's a form of freedom. Even if you are behind barbed wire, electrified fences and tall walls you have the freedom to speak and use your mind. You are treated like a human being, not a (prison) number."

Khalifa said he is living proof. While taking Southwestern College classes at Donovan he was granted parole. He continued to work on an Associate's degree on the Chula Vista campus, logging a 4.0 GPA. Later this month he expects to earn a Bachelor's degree in sociology from UC Irvine.

His personal evolution started the first day he saw a classroom in the prison. Chairs, tables and whiteboards began to change the culture at Donovan, he said.

"Every classroom was full," he said. "Everybody was really engaged."

Funches said she and other restorative justice advocates are attempting to reframe what education looks like for the incarcerated.

"These individuals are some of the most intelligent people I have met," she said. "(Most Americans) do not put in the effort to understand why people become incarcerated. Why is it that the U.S. incarcerates the most people in the world?"

Southwestern College Professor of Philosophy Peter Bolland said he taught at Donovan early in his career and witnessed the transformative power of education.

"It does something to (incarcerated people)," he said. "It changes them. Students who go through the program have a lower recidivism rate."

Bolland said restorative justice programs have been slowed in parts of the country by conservative politicians who consider prisoners unsympathetic and unworthy of the investment. In



California, he said, the average cost of incarceration is about \$130,000 per person.

"Education is a win-win situation," he said. "With more education there is lower recidivism. That means less crimes and fewer of us being hurt by criminal behavior. If being conservative means reducing government expenses, lowering costs and more efficient government, then paying to educate incarcerated people is a conservative (endeavor) because it saves money and lowers crime rates."

Milkovich said restorative justice is a money saver for taxpayers. Every dollar invested in education of prisoners saves \$4-5 in incarceration costs.

Southwestern adjunct instructors Mark Lieberman and Peter Maxwell agree. Both teach twice a week at Donovan and say they are passionate about the restorative justice program. Lieberman said students are equally passionate.

"The students are eager to learn," he said. "They come ready to engage in class discussions and are enthusiastic to participate in group work. They wait patiently for their turn to talk and provide detailed feedback."



Lieberman said he enjoys helping his students at Donovan because he believes they want to change and have better lives.

"If you are a felon no one wants to hire you," he said. "Employers look more favorably upon people who have studied and possibly earned degrees. Education inside a penitentiary gives (former prisoners) the opportunity to have significantly better employment when they get out."

People motivated to change their

lives make good employees, Lieberman said.

"Well over 50 percent of the people in the penitentiary did not get a good education to begin with," he said.

Data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicate that 41 percent of inmates in the federal prison system and local jails had not completed high school. Research by the Rand Corporation concluded that prisoners who participate in correctional education classes have a 43 percent

lower chance of recidivism and a 13 percent higher chance of gaining employment upon release. Students who earn degrees do even better.

When he taught argumentation and debate, Lieberman said, students were excited to participate in debates in the yard after class. Prison administrators said they liked the fact that students could debate issues without it turning into a fight.

"This is the good work," he said. "(Failed education experiences form) the pinpoint where our system has fallen down for a really long time. The deal is supposed to be you do your time, you get out and your debt is paid. If we are still going to let corporations say 'no felons allowed,' then we need to balance out the scales somewhere else. That is the duty of education."

Southwestern's Restorative Justice Program, established in 2016, has enrolled 5,944 students, according to Funches. The completion rate is 94 percent and 89 percent earn a C or better. It offers seven Associate of Science degrees and 70 Associate of Arts degrees. It has awarded 18 certificates in American sign language.

Maxwell, who teaches film classes, said he finds his work at Donovan rewarding.

"The students at Donovan are very grateful for this opportunity to improve their lives, find a sense of growth and heal," he said.

Milkovich said 95 percent of incarcerated people are scheduled for an eventual release.

"Do we want to set them up for success?" she said. "Or do we want them set up for failure to return to prison?"

"We try to emphasize that our students are not defined by their worst mistake," added Funches.

John Price, a 45-year-old ex-incarcerated, called the Southwestern College Restorative Justice Program "a miracle." He expects to graduate from SDSU this spring.

"My life has been pretty difficult," he said. "I've spent almost 20 years in prison, so it was a long, arduous journey. (Restorative justice) helps you to believe in yourself and realize that you can do worthwhile things. Even the smallest successes create momentum for more successes. It's a blessing."

VIEWPOINTS

Editorials • Opinions • Letters to the Editor



The mission of the Southwestern College Sun is to serve its campuses and their communities by providing information, insights and stimulating discussions of news, activities and topics relevant to our readers. The staff strives to produce a newspaper that is timely, accurate, fair, interesting, visual and accessible to readers. Though The Sun is a student publication, staff members ascribe to the ethical and moral guidelines of professional journalists.

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Columbia University Scholastic Press Association Gold Medal for Journalism Excellence 2001-23	Journalism Association of Community Colleges Pacesetter Award 2001-18, 2022-24 Newspaper General Excellence 2000-2024
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GUN VIOLENCE STEALS YOUNG AMERICANS' FUTURES AND DREAMS

This is a joyful graduation season for South Bay high school seniors and their families. Another wave of

COVID survivors declared victory over the virus and the hardships it placed on isolated students and frazzled parents.

No more drive-by commencements, take out celebration dinners in Styrofoam and campaign style yard signs with pictures of mortar boards. Rock bands and mariachi blared from backyards wafting with the aroma of carne asada and hamburgers. Streets were choked with cars whose back windows were covered in cheery well wishes scrawled with bars of soap.

From San Ysidro High School near the border to venerable SUHI in National City, our community rejoiced at an All-American rite of passage.

In the borough of Newtown, Connecticut, however, graduation season is muted and somber. Its class of 2024 paused frequently to acknowledge some teenagers who could not be there to celebrate their graduation. They could not be there because they were dead.

This spring would have been graduation time for the youthful victims of the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre. It unfurled when an unhinged 20 year old stole his mother's guns, killed her, then murdered six brave educators and 20 innocent children.

The kids were all 6 and 7 year olds. Their hopes and dreams died with them on the tile floors of their blood-soaked classrooms.

We wish we could report that this horrific tragedy sparked a national reckoning on America's barbaric gun culture. We wish we could say that sensible legislation has made our nation safer from gun violence. We wish we could say that the children of Sandy Hook did not die in vain.

Sadly, we cannot.

Nothing has changed.

In fact, our nation has actually gone backward. For example:

- The 1994 federal Assault Weapons Ban expired in 2004 when the George W. Bush administration did not lift a finger to renew it. Repeated attempts in Congress to re-establish it have all failed, including a proposed bill named for Sandy Hook victims.
- 32 states now allow teachers and public school staff to carry concealed weapons on campus.
- Bump stocks – the sadistic attachment that transforms a rifle into a machine gun – are legal again thanks to a ruling this month by the Supreme Court. Bump stocks had been banned following the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting that killed 60 and wounded at least 413.

Sandy Hook is on the other side of the continent, but anyone who thinks a mass shooting cannot happen here is delusional. Southwestern College, in fact, narrowly missed being a killing ground in 1999 when a schizophrenic man drove from Missouri with an assault rifle, pistol and 265 rounds of ammunition to kill a professor and everyone around him. An alert teenager working at the gas station across the street prevented a certain massacre when he spotted the man loading his weapons and preparing to enter our campus.

Graduation Day has led the Editorial Board of the Sun to reflect on the achievements of our remarkable 17-year-old Associate Editor-in-Chief Nicolette Monique Luna, who graduated from Bonita Vista High School this month. Nikki joined The Sun as a 15-year-old BVHS sophomore. She won a state journalism award for her very first article, an extensive exploration of gun violence in San Diego County that focused on our South Bay community. Our progressive-leaning communities are, alas, awash in guns as well as the maladies and social stressors that push people to use them.

Nikki interviewed the families of victims and activists from San Diegans for the Prevention of Gun Violence. Like most sensible Americans, they said they were fed up with milquetoast politicians offering "thoughts and prayers" but no legislation to address gun violence.

Dual enrolled at BVHS and Southwestern, Nikki became Editor-in-Chief of El Sol Magazine, leading three issues – two of which (so far) have earned the collegiate Pulitzer Prize and a raft of other awards. She is the first high school student ever named National College Reporter of the Year and the only student ever to earn the San Diego Press Club award for community service. She has a bright future.

A young man with a gun snuffed out the futures of 20 children in Connecticut. Guns have killed at least 525,000 Americans since then. The number has steadily increased each year, surpassing 50,000 in 2023.

Right now thoughts and prayers are just about our only defense against gun violence. Meaningful change may depend on our generation, which has been on the wrong end of stressful lockdowns, phoned in death threats and terrifying encounters with shooters.

We are so happy Nikki graduated from high school. We wish the kids of Sandy Hook could have, too.

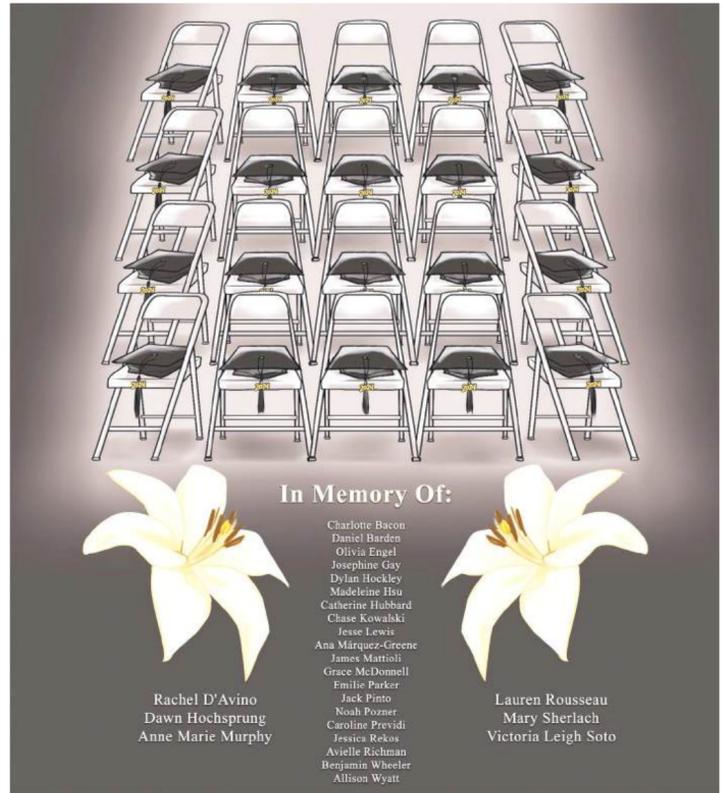


ILLUSTRATION BY CARLA LABTO / STAFF

I STAND TO HONOR MY MILITARY FAMILY, REJECT INJUSTICE

BY ZEKE WATSON

A Perspective

My first grade class in Texas started each day as most other first grade classes. Like an electronic rooster, the intercom would crow and the principal would crackle over the loudspeaker at precisely 8 a.m.

"Please stand for the Pledge of Allegiance," he would say with proper solemnity.

Chairs scooted out from under us as we stood to face the flag fixed near the door.

My six-year-old self did not understand the purpose of that morning ritual, other than to signal that class had begun. It was an empty exercise, rote and dull. We just stood.

We are not wide-eyed little first graders anymore, standing on command. As adults, we do not recite the Pledge much. The National Anthem is our grown up ritual, sung before sports events and some ceremonies.

America's high-minded pledge and anthem are aspirational, especially for people of color and the LGBTQ+ community. It is drug store makeup used to cover this nation's ancient blemishes. Our checkered history has left it smeared and runny, revealing patches of ugliness. Sometimes it is hard for people like me to stand.

Yet I do. So do other people of color and those from the LGBTQ+ community who devoted a portion of their lives to serving this country in the military. I enlisted not out of blind patriotism but for the opportunity. The Navy allowed me to escape small town Texas to begin a new life and a new adventure. During my five years in the Navy I developed a sense of pride for the flag and National Anthem. I stood erect and held a tight salute when called for.

As a Black veteran, though, the rituals can be complicated. America can be a dangerous place if you are Black. A stroll down the street can go well or become fatal in an instant. Sometimes I am praised for serving my country when folks learn I was in the Navy. Other times I feel I should just tuck tail and go home so people – specifically white people – can't profile me.

I do my best to avoid the police. After being racially profiled by San Diego Police during my first visit to the city, it left a disgusting and permanent taste in my mouth.

In 2013 a friend and I were pulled over by SDPD officers after we missed a turn and pulled into a parking lot to reroute ourselves. I saw a police cruiser slip in behind us and turn on its lights. My stomach sank as my mind raced for a reason for the stop. We pulled over, they approached the car and said a taillight was out. A classic line to start a classic "Driving While Black" episode.

We had just driven nearly 2,000 miles without a problem and now our taillight is not working? I felt my blood boil and my jaw tighten as I listened to the lying cops spin their fanciful and condescending tale. I assured the officer that the light had been working last time I checked – which was true. His disrespectfulness caused my tone to evolve from docile to militant. He did not like that.

We were ordered from our car and told to stand against the hood of the squad car as one of the cops put on a charade like he was smelling something strange emanating from our vehicle.

"Kind-a smells like weed," he said with the mechanical rotteness of a bad actor reciting but not performing his lines.

We had smoked a cigarette before we began our San Diego excursion, but no weed.

Surprise! They found nothing.

I was livid, but swallowed my anger so the cops would not have any excuses to mistreat us further. California was supposed to be progressive, I thought, more progressive than Texas. That encounter damaged my view of police and made me once again ponder my place as a Black man.

It is all so common for Black men to be singled out and treated with suspicion. This type of prejudice casts a dark cloud upon us that seems inescapable. My every step needs to be calculated and carefully mapped out to ensure safety. It is disheartening, exhausting and can leave me feeling helpless.

America does not embody its Pledge of Allegiance or national anthem. This country does not treat everyone with the same respect or dignity they are entitled to as citizens. Prejudice and violence toward people of color and the LGBTQ+ community is the real daily ritual.

Being a Black veteran in America is tricky.

I still stand proudly for the national anthem and the flag like that wide-eyed first grader standing for the pledge. When I stand, though, it is not a celebration of this country, but respect for my brothers and sisters who took that same military oath of service I once did. I demonstrate solidarity for my friends and those I consider family who are still serving. I stand for them.

I understand why people who identify as Black, Latino, Asian, Indigenous and members of the LGBTQ+ community feel excluded from the embrace of America when they see the flag or hear the National Anthem. These symbols do not always represent our experiences. I understand why many people sit or kneel in protest. It is honorable to protest laws and practices that silence or belittle entire classes of people.

Although I stand for the National Anthem, I will not stand idle and blind to the injustices that diminish our country. I, too, demand change from a country that talks a good game but has yet to ensure "liberty and justice for all."



THINKING OUT LOUD

COMPILED BY MARITZA PRIETO

What are some of the challenges faced by college students who are parents?



LILIANA SANDOVAL

"Finding time to study and do homework. It is a challenge setting aside time for myself to study. I rush through homework because I'm afraid my four kids will ask for something."



ARINA LEE

"(I am used) to being the provider and making things happen, but there comes a point where I have to be okay asking for help."



ABRAHAM RUVALCABA

"Managing time and achieving balance between family, work and college has been very hard. Being head of a household is already hard."



CELESTE HARTIGAN

"I try to stay focused on good things by making time for my daughter, my grandson and my husband while balancing work, full-time college and being a caretaker. Being a mother, grandmother, wife and woman is stressful."

CORRECTION

In the May issue the name of Assistant Professor of Native American Studies David Salomon was misspelled. The special section "Good Day to be an Indian" also misidentified Professor Salomon as a member of the Kumeyaay People. He actually identifies as Gabriellino/Tongva. The Sun apologizes for the errors.

CAMPUS

Campus News • Student News • Profiles

DEBATE TEAM CC NATIONAL CHAMPS

BY JUAN H. ESTRADA

Does pineapple belong on pizza? Don't get these students started.

They are the Jaguars Debate Team. They are successful, well-prepared, award-winning debaters. And yes, for fun they debate whether tropical fruit belongs on pizza.

Professor of Communications Eric Maag, one of their coaches, said the hard-working debaters deserve to have a little fun at dinner time.

"We do policy debate," said the 20-year veteran debate advisor. "It's the most rigorous form of debate out there."

The Jaguars participated this spring in the three-day Cross Examination Debate Association National Debate Tournament at CSU Fullerton. This year's topic was policy surrounding restricting U.S. nuclear forces. At national tournaments like these, Maag said, the competition is fierce.

Collegiate debate teams are not categorized by university level or community college. Everyone battles together in a pool-style competition. Southwestern College's debate team fearlessly enters these national competitions, Maag said, frequently ranking in the top 10.

Best not to bet on Goliath when David is in the house.

The Jaguars took home the Joy McClintock Community College Award, a sweepstakes trophy presented to the top debate team in the country at the end of each season.

Southwestern grabbed third in Individual Novice Team, a doubles-style debate where teams of two compete. Jaguars Karina Sanchez and Stefany Pagan capped an excellent year by bringing home a national award.

Team captain Sanchez brought home the prestigious National New Outstanding Competitor Award for the student who embodies the essence of debate. Maag called it a history-making triumph for Sanchez.

"It has to do with someone who not only brings competitive success, but also the character that we value in debate -- people who advocate for themselves and for others," he said. "It's exceptional. We've never had a student win the Newcomer of the Year Award. Karina is a very special person."

Sanchez, a *transfronteriza* who commutes to Southwestern College from Mexico said these accomplishments seem unbelievable because she sometimes feels like an outsider in the realm of debate.

"I thought debate was a White man's sport," said Sanchez. "(I am) a queer Latina. I was really surprised I was nominated and actually won. It is validating. And to win third place with another Latina creates a space for us to be accepted in debate."

"I am really proud of Karina," said debate teammate Jacian Arreola. "It proves this person is dedicated to their craft. This award includes universities. That shows how much of a great accomplishment Karina had."

Maag was also honored. He was named National Public Advocate of the Year for his contributions to labor rights and his role as lead negotiator securing healthcare for part-time employees. It marks the first time a Southwestern College debate coach received a national award for non-debate work.

"Maag-o'roni is what everyone calls him," said Sanchez. "He's the greatest."

Head debate coach Ryan Wash won the Critic of the Year Award given to highly-regarded individuals in the debate community.

So, does pineapple belong on pizza?

"Oh my God! Yes it does," said Sanchez. "It's sweet. You get the savory taste, it's so delicious."

Go ahead and debate Sanchez -- if you dare.

College CARES about single moms

BY YANELLI Z. ROBLES

Life works in mysterious ways. So does motherhood.

When my 3-year-old daughter tripped on the charging cable of my laptop it short-circuited the mother board as well as this mother.

I comforted and reassured my little girl, but I was the person who actually needed comforting and reassurance. Without a laptop, I was doomed.

My EOPS counselor saved me. I was directed to the SWC Cares team, which, to my astonishment, gave me a brand new, right-out-of-the-box laptop and a personal hot spot.

It was not the first time Southwestern College rescued my future. When a rough divorce turned me into a single mom, I felt I was drowning in a cold, dark ocean of despair. My dreams sank into the murky water and disappeared from my sight.

Southwestern College became my lifeboat, floating me through the rip currents of my failed relationship, my fears and my doubts. I have 4 and 2 year-old kids who escaped with me from an abusive marriage and we struggled against a rip current.

When I signed up for my first semester in spring 2023 everything changed. College resources such as EOPS, CARES and the Child Development Center put a sail on my lifeboat.

EOPS is a godsend for single parents in college. I meet with a dedicated EOPS counselor three

times a semester, receive grants for textbooks and supplies, and have priority registration for classes.

The grants are wonderful, but access to a counselor is paramount. Southwestern has a counselor shortage and wait times can be long. My counselor helped me create a Student Education Plan (SEP) that broke down my classes by semester and helped me identify the courses I need to complete my Associate's degree. My SEP feels like a life jacket, keeping me buoyant, preventing me from sinking into a whirlpool of unnecessary classes.

Priority registration is a steady breeze pushing my boat along. I can sign up for classes early, guaranteeing that I will be able to register for the specific sections I need.

CARES is a lifeline. It has workshops, parent support groups, grants and social activities to connect single parents. To be eligible students must be 18 years old, head of a household, a parent or guardian and receive Cash Aid.

Staff members at CARES really do care. I have struggled with depression and anxiety for many years, and both conditions worsened after the hormonal infusion of childbirth. CARES workshops helped me address those feelings and showed me where to get help on campus. Parents I have met through this program are now part of my community and support group. All in the same boat, together.

CARES grants helped with childcare, rent, gas

and bills. Worrying about feeding and sheltering your children is a primal anxiety for mothers. It was impossible for me to concentrate on my education when I was worried about providing the basics for my children. CARES helped me to move from survival mode to learning mode.

Southwestern's Child Development Center (CDC) is my children's second home. Low-income parents can receive assistance from CCAMPIS, a federal program available to Pell Grant student-parents enrolled in at least six units. This gem of a program supports college students as well as the academic growth of their children.

My kids found stability at the CDC. They look forward to gardening, playing with their friends and an array of activities they love so much. When my children enrolled in the CDC my academics blossomed. I have peace of mind that they are safe and close by. Every eligible parent should apply for CCAMPIS.

At Southwestern I feel cared for, supported and encouraged. I am motivated to earn a Bachelor's, Master's and -- someday -- a Doctorate.

My boat is pointed toward my goals. I am once again sailing toward the life I imagined for myself and my kids. There will be some rough waters ahead now and then for my young family, but we have life vests and people looking after us. Southwestern College and its caring people have rekindled my passion to learn and empowered me to dream again.



PHOTO BY BLANCA ESTHELA CASTAÑEDA GARCÍA / STAFF

INTERNATIONAL RELIEF EFFORT—Members of the Southwestern College Binational Transfronterizo Club lead a beach cleanup in Playas de Tijuana.

BINATIONAL CLUB BLOSSOMS

BY BLANCA CASTANEDA GARCIA

Countless American College students cross town to get to campus. Some cross city limits.

Only Southwestern College students cross international borders.

Southwestern's *transfronterizos* (border crossers) are so highly motivated to attend college they often wake up well before dawn, wait in grueling lines in the dark, take 3-4 modes of transportation, eat street food on the run and then repeat the process in the other direction each evening. They are used to being hungry, carrying heavy backpacks, being stuck in noxious traffic, being lost on the bus, and getting the stink eye for being late to class.

SC's Binational Fronterizo Club is where border crossing students can find support and encouragement from others of their rare breed. Advised by ESL Advocate Specialist Angelina Barrera and ESL instructor Joanna Esser, the club can be a few minutes of sanctuary and understanding for the high-mileage, high-stress *transfronterizos* *collegistas*.

Transfronterizos are bilingual, binational and tend to be global thinkers, said Esser. Tijuana and San Diego County are both international

regions on their own. Together they are a global economic and cultural powerhouse. Binational students like Southwestern's *transfronterizos* are America's hope for an inevitable future that is multinational, multicultural and global.

The San Ysidro and Otay Mesa border crossings are magical transit zones that see more than 10 million people a year pass through in both directions. Southwestern Community College District encompasses the busiest international border crossing on the planet -- the most crossed border in the history of humanity.

Despite that, *la linea* can also be a waking nightmare of bureaucracy, short tempers, corruption, incompetence, inconsistency and tie ups. Southwestern's Office of Binational and International Programs is partnering with the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol to help make it easier and quicker for *transfronterizo* students to obtain lifesaving Global Entry/Sentri Cards.

Sentri allows card holders to enter special lines that are shorter, faster and less invasive. It can also alleviate problems like the ban on bringing food from home across the border and unexpected delays.

Camila Gutierrez, 19, said she is a fan of the Transfronterizo Club because members

understand the challenges regular border crossers face.

"The club provides opportunities and solutions for *transfronterizo* students that are not generally part of the regular (college) experience," she said. "Having support is very important. It motivates you to continue coming to school and to keep studying."

Some *transfronterizos* are reticent to talk about their situation with Americans because sometimes they encounter racism or people who did not understand that American citizens of Mexican heritage may legally live in Tijuana and attend school in the United States. The Binational Fronterizo Club is a safe place to talk about experiences and strategies.

It is also a place to serve the community. Carla Gutierrez, 21, took part in a Tijuana beach cleanup with club members this spring. She said the project helped to connect her with the environment and some of the issues that transcend borders and plague both countries.

The Binational Fronterizo Club welcomes new members said Carla Gutierrez. Students may email either of the advisers at abarrera@swccd.edu or jesser@swccd.edu. The club's Instagram account is @binationalfronterizoswcc.

NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS ADVOCATE FOR MISSING WOMEN

BY JUAN H. ESTRADA

America's longest-running genocide never ended, it just became invisible. Native American women and girls are murdered at 10 times the nation's already high homicide rate. Tens of thousands have just vanished without a trace.

Southwestern College's Native American Student Association (NASA) is adding its voice to the growing chorus calling for action by law enforcement and lawmakers. NASA hosted a screening of the documentary "Bring Her Home" to create awareness in South San Diego County.

Indigenous women make up less than one percent of the population of the United States and are targeted for kidnapping, sexual assault and murder at a higher rate than any people outside of transgender Americans. Most of the women disappear in remote parts of the United States, but frightening numbers are also victimized in towns and cities.

"Bring Her Home," a depressing but inspiring documentary being broadcast on PBS stations across the county, is a pioneering film about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG is the shorthand of Indigenous activists). The very title of the project is steeped in sorrow. The call to "bring her home" is a plea to return the bodies of long missing victims.

David Salomon, assistant professor of Native American Studies, and NASA screened the film on campus recently.

"The most important message is raising awareness," said Salomon. "There is a crisis with Native women, who are the center of our culture. They go missing, experience sexual abuse and are murdered. (They suffer) stalking and cyber-abuse. Most Americans do not see Native People. It's a problem of being invisible in the dominant society."

"Bring Them Home" follows three Native women who became heroes through their activism and willingness to speak out. One is an artist, one an activist and the third a pioneering elected official. All three were touched by the violence and terror facing Native women. Each explores and attacks the crisis differently, using their respective talents. Progress is starting to find traction, but it is a grueling, glacial process.

The situation is complicated, but some patterns are emerging. Native American women often live in vulnerability, in remote locations on or off reservations. They disproportionately live near extraction sites, be it oil, uranium or mining. Workers in these locations tend to be younger white men of means, some of whom seem to believe that Native women are girls are sex objects that they can have their way with, according to activist Mysti Babineau.

"These men working in construction or extraction are away from home, have money and believe they can get away with mistreating Indigenous women," she said.

Indigenous activists say that Native women and girls disappear three times – from the Earth, from the data and from the memory of the broader society. Tens of thousands of missing women and girls have never been found. Unknown numbers are missing but have not been reported. Even rapes and sexual assaults reported in a timely manner are often not investigated due to inept police work or holes in jurisdictions. Data – if it can even be called that – is porous, spotty and incomplete to the point of worthless. In 2016 at least 5,716 Indigenous women were reported missing. Only 116 made it into FBI logs.

Artist Angela Two Stars uses her gift for art and symbolism to push back on stereotypes and



ILLUSTRATION BY CARLA LABTO / STAFF

hurtful images from the dominant culture. Her plan for an enormous installation piece received the blessing of Dakota elders.

"We are on a long journey of healing," an elder told her. "It is a circle. There is no end to it."

Two Stars uses Dakota language prominently in her walk-through installation in Minneapolis. The Dakota word *woohoda* means "respect" as well as "conducting yourself with respect."

She tries to speak to men with her work, she said.

"We need men to support us," she said. "They need to be protective of their mothers and sisters and grandmothers and women in their lives."

Ruth Buffalo decided to run for public office so she could directly influence legislation effecting Indigenous People in her home state of North Dakota. In one of the most touching scenes in the film Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, a member of the Laguna Pueblo People of New Mexico and the first Native American member of a presidential cabinet, becomes emotional during a Congressional hearing thanking Buffalo for running for office and for her effective work on behalf of Indigenous People in the upper Midwest.

"Thank you," Haaland said to Buffalo. "You are a great woman. You were meant to serve."

Glimmers of hope peppered the final minutes of the documentary, most notably the passage of Savanna's Act, legislation by then-Congresswoman Haaland and Norma Torres co-sponsored in the Senate by Catherine Cortez Masto. It reforms law enforcement and justice protocols and gives tribal police access to federal

databases. It is named for Fargo, North Dakota resident Savanna LaFontaine Greywind, a young pregnant woman murdered and harvested for her baby. Police work on her case was neglectful and doused with racism.

Healing will not come without justice, said Babineau, but resilient and inherently optimistic Native Americans nevertheless seek to heal even as the genocide continues. Ojibwe jingle dress dancers (including Dine' Southwestern College biology student Winter Begay) perform across the nation seeking peace and healing.

When an Indigenous woman goes missing, it ends the lifeline in of that clan. Indigenous women in the United States, like the women of Mexico, are fighting back.

Lazy police and unscrupulous politicians underestimate the strength and resolve of Native women, according to Babineau. Films like "Wind River" and TV shows like "Dark Winds" have led a new wave of Native and non-Indigenous artists speaking out against America's silent genocide.

Like the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s, and the United Farm Workers Movement of the 1970s, the MMIWG Movement has activists, artists and elected officials working together to generate and inspire allies through creativity and courage.

Making the invisible visible for all to see is the crucial first step, Two Stars said in a recent interview with a Minneapolis newspaper.

"Under the surface, we're all the same," she said. "We're all made up of the same bones, blood and DNA. It's all under these various shades of skin color that causes a lot of terrible things."

"Under the surface, we're all the same. We're all made up of the same bones, blood and DNA. It's all under these various shades of skin color that causes a lot of terrible things."

ANGELA TWO STARS

Member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate

ARTS

Campus Arts • Reviews • Community Culture

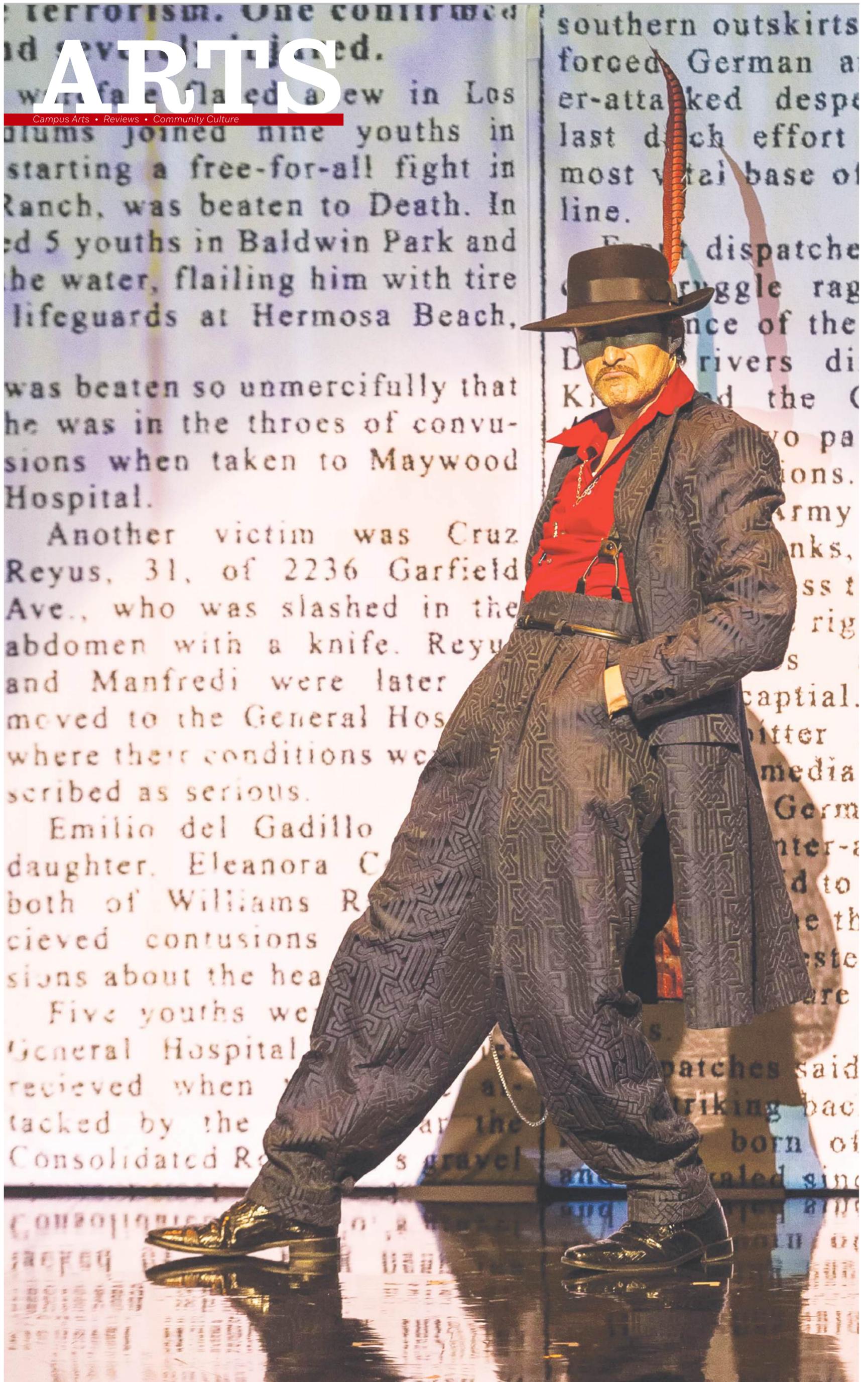


Photo Courtesy of Annenberg Media

GODFATHER OF CHICANO THEATER

Luis Valdez, prolific creator of 'Zoot Suit' and 'La Bamba,' urges young Chicanos to take up his torch

BY BLANCA ESTHELA CASTAÑEDA GARCÍA

Playwrights often joke that they worry an unhappy theater audience might throw tomatoes.

Luis Valdez worried about being shot at.

America's pioneering Chicano playwright and filmmaker said gunplay was not the only thing that made his early work with the United Farm Workers dangerous.

His intended audience often watched his 15-minute *actos* in 100 degree heat, sun stroked, thirsty, hungry, scared and tired. Gun toting landowners and the local police they had in their pockets were a near-constant menace.

"That's why *actos* were so short," he said with a chortle.

Valdez paid a visit to Southwestern College recently to meet with theatre arts students and social justice activists. The Peabody Award-winning and Golden Globe nominated writer, director, actor and university professor formed El Teatro Campesino (the farmworker's theater) in 1965 to support the work of UFW leaders Cesar Chavez and Delores Huerta. He and a small cast of 2-4 actors would roll flatbed trucks up the edge of farms in the Central Valley and perform *Actos*, short one-act plays. He had learned street theatre during his time with the revolutionary San Francisco Mime Company and took it from the bustling sidewalks of The City to dusty off roads near out backs like Delano, Del Rey and San Juan Batista.

Actors taught the farm workers that they had the right to water, decent housing, breaks and school for their children. They also had the right to put their money in a bank.

El Teatro Campesino also performed in towns and cities to teach the broader population about the abuse and deprivation of the hard-working, long-suffering laborers who harvested their food. Sometimes Teatro Campesino used real *campesinos* as actors. That was challenging.

"I just had to get people on their feet to begin to improvise their own reality," he said. "Rather than impose something, we encouraged people to speak for themselves. That became really important and continues to be a principle for us today."

Southwestern marked the visit of Valdez and his wife, Lupe Trujillo Valdez, by raising the UFW's iconic red flag with a black eagle. As the eagle rose into a pearl overcast sky, students honored Mother Earth with the Salute to the Four Winds, an ancient Mesoamerican rite. Valdez, a 1999 Southwestern College Honorary Degree recipient, smiled nostalgically.

Valdez first met César Chávez in Delano when he was just 6 years old. Delano was a hardscrabble town of about 10,000, barely more than a grape and cotton picking labor camp. Segregated Mexican and Filipino immigrants lived in shoddy sheds when they were not laboring in triple digit heat under the relentless San Joaquin Valley sun.

Teatro Campesino and its mobile messages found success.

People began to notice. His flatbed truck/portable stage drew crowds when it rumbled into farm areas striped with verdant rows of strawberries, onions and celery. Most viewers were the farmworkers they sought to educate, but many were gun toting plantation owners, their thuggish private security and local cops

who did their bidding. Shots were occasionally fired, though Valdez said he does not think an actor was ever hit by gunfire.

Others noticed, too, including theatre professionals in New York City who in 1968 presented Teatro Campesino an Obie Award -- off-Broadway's highest honor -- for its courage

and service to a vulnerable population. Valdez's *actos* became popular fare at progressive colleges and universities.

"They gave us the Obie for demonstrating the politics of survival," said Trujillo Valdez. "It was after they saw the theater's national tour in 1967. We were in New York promoting the (table grape) boycott."

Teatro Campesino stayed in the fields and clearings of the Central Valley for many years as Valdez worked on other projects, including one of his masterpieces. His edgy musical "Zoot Suit" explored the mostly-forgotten Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 when military recruits and Los Angeles police attacked Latinos who wore flashy zoot suits. Navy sailors and Marines beat and stripped Latinos wearing peacoats, feathered hats and other stylish clothes, accusing the Mexican-Americans of being disrespectful of the war effort by wasting fabric.

"Zoot Suit" ran for nearly a year at the Mark Taper Forum in L.A. and was lured to Broadway in 1979. It was the first (and still only) Chicano production ever produced on the Great White Way. Valdez directed a film version starring his brother Daniel Valdez and the great Edward James Olmos released in 1981. It was nominated for a Golden Globe Award and in 2019 was selected by the Library of Congress for preservation in the National Film Registry for its cultural significance.

In 1987 Valdez wrote and directed the motion picture smash "La Bamba," the story of the first Latino rock and roll star Ritchie Valens (Ricardo Steven Valenzuela). Valens' demise in a plane crash with music superstar Buddy Holly was immortalized in the Homeric Don McLean song "American Pie." "La Bamba" was a Golden Globe finalist, one of the most popular films of the year and a cultural touchstone for American Latinos.

SC theater arts major Xóchitl Ramos, 20, said it was an honor to meet Valdez because he paved the way for Latino performing artists.

"The very first professional theater production I ever saw was 'Zoot Suit' at the Cultural Center in Tijuana," she said, "I believe his work gives a voice to the underdog. In this case, the underdogs are quite literally us. Especially at the border, where you have the huge contrast of two different cultures. Chicano culture has always had to fight for its ideals and rights both in Mexico and the U.S."

Like Delores Huerta during her recent visit to the college, Valdez called for students and young Chicano/Latinos to take the torch from his generation of activists. He also encouraged talented writers, actors, signers and directors to take control of the narrative and tell Latino stories with truth and purpose.

"At the same time Chicano and Puerto Rican cinema has kind of dipped, the Mexican cinema has risen internationally, with Alejandro Iñárritu and Guillermo del Toro," he said, "The American experience has been relegated to second place in the minds of Los Angeles movie producers. They are corporate representatives. They represent the money."

Valdez said storytellers should write about what they know from their own experiences.

"Local stories told about us are a very difficult game," he said. "It's going to take a whole new generation of artists. These new movies are more personal. The quality is there, but they're not political in the same way, due to financing (from conservative sources)."

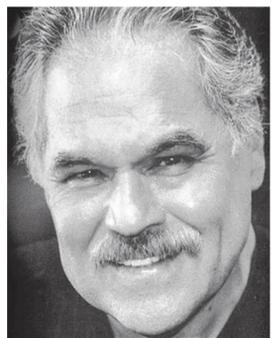
Now in life's third act, Valdez said he wants to make sure his work is available for future generation. His plays are now available in book form. He said he believes his films and scripts still have something to offer.

His wife Trujillo Lopez agreed.

"We've been around the block," she said. "The stories of our generation have meaning, but we need new generations to tell theirs."

Chicano artists have an outsized responsibility to represent their culture and enormous opportunities to have impact, Valdez said.

"If we don't tell our stories they may be lost," he said. "We are a storytelling people. Time for Chicanos to get busy."



Luis Valdez Photo Courtesy of Lupe Trujillo Valdez



Photo Courtesy of Craig Schwartz Photography

'ANOTHER WAY TO SAY MEXICAN'—

Valdez created the edgy character El Pachuco as the simmering inner voice of conflicted U.S. Navy recruit Henry Reyna in "Zoot Suit," the first Chicano play performed on Broadway. The film version was a hit, leading to the massively popular movie, "La Bamba," the tragic story of Ritchie Valens, the first Chicano rock star.



ANOTHER TASTE OF THE BEST—Southwestern's Mariachi Garibaldi remains on its throne as Planet Earth's premier collegiate mariachi following its memorable spring concert in the PAC. Superb musicianship and showmanship enthralled another SRO audience. (center) Dr. Jeff Nevin leads his elite ensemble.

■ REVIEW

EL MARIACHI MARAVILLOSO

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BLANCA ESTHELA CASTAÑEDA GARCÍA

To make history it helps to know history. Southwestern College's historically *maravilloso* mariachi has a luminous future because it knows how to honor the past. More important, it knows how to please a contemporary audience.

An SRO crowd at the PAC for mariachi is as expected as violet jacaranda flowers lining the roads into the college in June. So is a world-class performance from El Mariachi Garibaldi under the direction of maestro Dr. Jeff Nevin.

Garibaldistas wove together their organic orchestra of guitars, trumpets, flutes, harps, vihuela, guitarron and violin like Mexican Mozart. Siren voices completed the spell. Southwestern audiences have, after 25 years, grown accustomed to Nevin's radical inclusiveness, inviting gifted women into what was traditionally a male musical enclave.

Planet Earth's best collegiate mariachi killed it. Its sultry interpretation of the Brazilian classic "Mas Que Nada" felt as gracious as going on a much needed vacation. Relaxed and gentle, it swayed like twilight palms in an onshore breeze. Tender voices guided the melody from satisfying to sublime.

Giving the mariachi treatment to a Brazilian composition was a mildly seditious act by Nevin, but he pleased the purists with mariachi anthem "Volver, Volver." Its inclusion was predictable, but *el maestro's* attack always leaves room for surprises. *El mariachi americano* clearly knows Jazz and keeps his musicians on their toes by spontaneously calling down different players to sing. One after another the vocalists sauntered up to the mic, then hit it out of the park.

Mariachi songs are traditionally dedicated to someone, be it a hot woman in a tropical club with accordion walls or a respected *doña* on a sprawling rancho.

Classics are storytelling vehicles that require performance and commitment. Audience members welcome the overt romanticism and vocalize their approval, be it a melodramatic swoon or festive "Ay! Ay! Ay!"

Juan Gabriel's "Me gustas mucho" hit the marks. "I've liked you for a long time and what I like I get," can be macho braggadocio if sung aggressively, flirty if sung tentatively or seductive if performed just right. The band plucked heartstrings like a heavenly harp. It was *mariachi magica*.

Mexico's Golden Era of Music was treated *con respeto* but with a whiff of punk that made it feel as if it belonged in the Age of Swift and the Queen Bey. It has been a quarter century of excellence for Southwestern's mariachi with no end in sight.



MUSIC AND DANCE FROM LA TIERRA—Nevin helped open the door for women to perform with men in traditionally patriarchal mariachi. Some of his students are members of the Los Angeles-based Grammy-winning all-female Mariachi Divas.

SPORTS

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“Jim Trotter is a man unafraid, a man of convictions, a family man.”

NICK CANEPA, San Diego Union-Tribune columnist



Photos Courtesy of SC Jaguars

TWO-SPORT STAR IS ONE OF A KIND—First team All-PCAC soccer star Gialli Francisco won the respect of her teammates by winning at soccer and the gratitude of the community for losing at basketball.

SET SHOT SUPERHERO

BY JOSE GUZMAN

Gialli Francisco, the personable soccer star who saved the basketball season, has much bigger goals in life.

Like becoming a nurse and saving people. Until then, she would settle for a 2024 soccer championship.

A First Team All-PCAC striker and captain of the soccer team, Francisco created the feel good story of the year when she and 12 soccer teammates volunteered to become the Southwestern College women's basketball team after the original squad imploded due to illness, injuries and poor grades. Neither she or her soccer teammates had ever played organized basketball.

They were not very good at soccer. The 2022 Lady Jaguars were PCAC champions and the 2023 team missed repeating by an eyelash. They are among the 2024 favorites.

They were not very good at basketball, losing every game by whopping margins.

Francisco said points were never the point. Showing up and representing Southwestern on the hardwood was the mission. That was accomplished with flying colors. They may have lost every basketball game, but they won the hearts of the entire community.

Heroes appear in times of chaos and challenge. Francisco heard about the basketball team's meltdown and had an idea.

"I never played basketball before," she said, "(but the soccer team and I) were talking about how the basketball team did not have enough (players) to have a season. The opportunity to do it together was very important to us. It was all of us wanting to do it as a team."

Soccer Coach Carolina Soto said the basketball episode was just another example of Francisco's "remarkable leadership abilities."

"The soccer team is very close and after their season they were kind of searching for a way to stay together," Soto said. "Gialli heard about the basketball team's situation and approached the coach about soccer players filling in. The next thing we knew Gialli had 12 soccer players ready to suit up for basketball."

There was no fantastical made-for-Disney ending with the Lady Jags winning the championship and posing for statues. SC's soccer players were often a full foot shorter than the lanky women who excelled at hoops at other colleges. They shot at the basket like they were shot putting at a track meet. Great



"I play hard and tend to forget soccer is a sport that I actually love. Playing basketball showed me that you can have fun when you are trying to learn something new. At the end of the day it's still a competitive sport and we all wanted to give all of our intensity and very best efforts. That is what you should always do in life."

GIALLI FRANCISCO
SC Jaguars Soccer Captain

at dribbling soccer balls, they struggled to dribble basketballs.

But there was a fairy tale ending.

A packed gym of delirious supporters watched the soccer rockers play their final home game against Mira Costa and the love was palpable. They were crowned like sweaty homecoming queens at halftime with tiaras and roses. They received multiple standing ovations, including when they broke the elusive (for them) 20-point barrier. They were on every TV station and feted by big city print journalists.

Francisco admitted she did not see that coming. Again, not the point, she said. For the captain of the soccer team the excursion into basketball was an act of sisterhood for the players and service to the community they grew up in.

"It taught me that when you put your mind to something you can really get it done," she said. "With soccer I have expectations for myself. I play hard and tend to forget this is a sport that I actually love. Playing basketball showed me that you can have fun when you are trying to learn something new. At the end of the day it's still a competitive sport and we all wanted to give all of our intensity and very best efforts. That is what you should always do in life."

Soto said Francisco is a talented soccer player who may play at the university level. More important, though, she is a talented and inspiring leader who brings out the best in the people around her.

"Gialli is going to continue being a leader for us," Soto said. "I know she is going to continue to work really hard and motivate her teammates to work hard, too. She will continue developing as a leader and I know that when she leaves our program, she is going to do amazing things."

On the pitch, the team had a successful 2023 season finishing second place with an 11-5-4 record, but that success did not translate to the hardwood. They lost some games by 100 points but played hard every second with smiles on their faces.

Francisco said it stung sometimes to look at the scoreboard, but she reminded her teammates that there are other ways to win.

"In soccer generally the scores are really close and to get blown out like that in basketball was something we weren't used to it," she said. "We had the mindset to say to ourselves 'it is fine, we do not need to worry about these scores.' The scores did not affect us. If anything it made us push a little harder. Each game our goal was to improve."

South Bay youth soccer is a big loose family in many ways, said Soto. Braided little girls play in youth leagues across parks and rec centers from the Mexican border to Chicano Park, fueled by orange slices, awash in Gatorade. Kids with talent and hunger move into teen leagues, then middle school and high school teams. As the pyramid gets smaller near the top, the players get to know each other, either as teammates or opponents — or both.

Francisco and most of her Jaguar crew knew each other before pulling on burgundy and gold kits. Sophomore Ariana Lieras is a member of Francisco's soccer sisterhood.

"We ended up becoming really good friends during high school and college soccer," said Lieras. "The (basketball) experience was new. It was an adventure. It is quite different from soccer. Gialli made it enjoyable. She is very much a team player. She is always willing to support everyone."

Summer workouts are underway and Francisco said the focus now is on the upcoming soccer season. She and her teammates hope to bring Southwestern a PCAC Championship.

Basketball is in the past, but Francisco said the joy she felt from the community and the confidence she gained from the unique, once-in-a-lifetime experience will stay in her heart. "Moving on and back to what we do best," she said.

Until the final whistle of the last match of the 2024 season, Francisco — nursing major, captain, leader — will be looking after her teammates. That is what she does best.

JUDGE SAYS JIM TROTTER SUIT AGAINST NFL CAN GO FORWARD

BY JULIO RODRIGUEZ

Jim Trotter will get his day in court. The NFL may have its hands full.

A New York District Court judge denied the NFL's request to completely dismiss Trotter's racial discrimination lawsuit against the league. Judge Jed S. Radkoff said all six of Trotter's claims of retaliation by the NFL could move forward. Trotter said the NFL retaliated by firing him after he had criticized the league and Commissioner Roger Goodell for underrepresenting Black journalists and writers in the NFL Media newsroom, a public relations and marketing arm of the league.



JIM TROTTER

Trotter's lawsuit is an attempt to initiate a court-ordered review of NFL policies and practices related to hiring and advancement of Black people. His 53-page complaint seeks an investigation into what he describes as discriminatory practices. NFL team owners are included in the lawsuit.

The NFL issued a statement that read in part: "We take his concerns seriously, but strongly dispute his specific allegations, particularly those made against his dedicated colleagues at NFL Media."

Trotter's attorney, David Gottlieb of Wigdor LLP, issued his own statement.

"With the NFL having failed to get this case dismissed, and with no arbitration agreement to save them, we look forward to finally holding the NFL responsible for its conduct in a forum fully open to the public," Gottlieb wrote.

Trotter is a Chula Vista native and a long-time NFL writer for the San Diego Union-Tribune, Sports Illustrated and ESPN: The Magazine. He is active in the San Diego Association of Black Journalists and teaches journalism classes at SDSU. He is respected nationally for his talent as a football writer and his advocacy for Black journalists.

He also has legions of journalists and civil rights leaders supporting his efforts. At this year's Super Bowl press briefing Kansas City sports radio host Darren Smith took up Trotter's torch and called out Goodell for firing Trotter. He then asked the NFL Commissioner the same questions Trotter had asked in 2022 and 2013 before his contract was not renewed.

"I know you don't run the NFL media newsroom, but you do run the NFL, and they answer to you as well as the 32 owners," Smith said to Goodell. "As of this press conference, the NFL Media newsroom still employs zero Black managers, zero Black copy editors, zero full-time Black employees on the news desk, and your only full-time Black employee, Larry Campbell, passed away over the weekend."

Smith pressed on with Trotter's line of questioning.

"In a league that has more than 60 percent of African Americans that have played the game, how does knowing this sit well with you? And after two years of being asked this question, why has there not been any change or any hirings in that area?"

Washington Post sports columnist Jerry Brewer has called Trotter "a courageous voice" and "a man I admire very much for taking a stand." San Diego Union-Tribune columnist Nick Canepa called himself a Trotter admirer.

"Jim is a man unafraid, a man of convictions, a family man and a beacon of Black pride who has pushed through the headwinds," wrote Canepa.

Trotter was the Grand Marshal of the 2020 Bonitafest which honored him for his "outstanding service to journalism students, commitment to civil rights and advocacy for fairness in the United States."

Trial dates are pending. Trotter said he would be there.

BACK PAGE

Voices In Our Communities



GRACING THE STAGE

PHOTOS BY YANELLI Z. ROBLES

Success has many fathers (mothers, too.) At Southwestern College success also has many kinds of faces. The college hosted a pair of commencement ceremonies that were a paragon of diversity in higher education populated with living, breathing (and walking) examples of the rich borderlands culture of South San Diego County.

There were brilliant dual enrolled teenagers barely old enough to drive, 20-somethings headed to universities, returning students in their 30s and 40s, parents, grandparents, formerly incarcerated and veterans from a panoply of cultures and a polyglot of languages. In other words, a typical South Bay gathering.

More than 800 students completed transfer degrees, certificates or other programs. Transfers are headed to California universities from SDSU to Humboldt and venerable national institutions as far away as Columbia in NYC and Southeastern HBCUs.

Many will use their new knowledge to serve locally, others will move far away to start new lives. Some—like Student Awards Ceremony keynote J. Michael Straczynski, the legendary science-fiction screenwriter and comic book author—will do both, moving away to find success, then coming home to share what they have learned during an adventurous lifetime.



Special Section

ADJACENT TO GENIUS



SOUTHWESTERN SUPERMAN

JMS

Hugo, Emmy winning writer is a global science-fiction icon and beloved alumnus

BY NICOLETTE MONIQUE LUNA

J Michael Straczynski knows bullies. On the mean streets across America the rootless boy and teen took the worst from the worst. JMS also knows heroes. He has used his magical pen and boundless creativity to bring forth the Amazing Spider-man, the mighty Thor, Captain John Sheridan of "Babylon 5," and Gerry Lane of "World War Z."

Straczynski's own hero's journey began at Chula Vista High School and Southwestern College. After graduating from SDSU he worked briefly as a journalist before a long, successful stretch as a television writer ("Jake and the Fat Man," "Murder She Wrote," "The Twilight Zone"). His breakout project was his brilliant sci-fi classic "Babylon 5," winner of two Emmy Awards and two Hugo Awards for best science fiction. "B5" ran for five years and spawned six motion pictures.

He then became a comic book legend for his work on "Wonder Woman," "Superman" and "The Amazing Spider-man." Later he developed his own sold-out series, "Ten Grand."

Nimble as a 6'-2" gymnast, Straczynski swung over to motion pictures as the screenwriter for "Changeling" with Ron Howard, Angelina Jolie and Clint Eastwood, and "Ninja Assassin" for the Wachowski sisters. He was the story writer for "Thor" (directed by Sir Kenneth Branagh) and "World War Z," starring Brad Pitt. Next he bounced back to TV as creator of the hit "Sense8."

Elite actors elbow for parts in Straczynski projects because they love performing his edgy, poetic dialogue and unique characters. Pitt said he was excited to star in "World War Z" when he learned that Straczynski was adapting the difficult source material for the big screen. He imbued heroes who charged into action like John Wayne but spoke like Shakespeare.

CONT'D PG B2

THE REAL STORY—Straczynski's soul-searching autobiography "Becoming Superman" is at turns poetic, sorrowful, mystifying, angry and joyous as he explores the cruelty of his early life and his towering success as a versatile American writing giant. Southwestern College chose "Becoming Superman" as its College Book of the Year and encourages students and staff to read it.

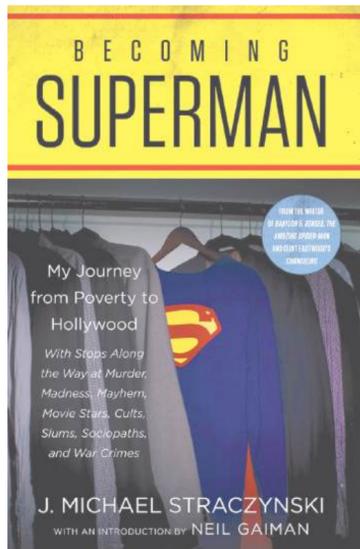


Image Courtesy of HarperVoyager / HarperCollins



Photo Courtesy of DC



DC COMICS

CHARACTER / TEAM TITLES INCLUDE:

- Teen Titans Spotlight
- Star Trek
- The Twilight Zone
- Babylon 5
- Babylon 5: In Valen's Name
- The Brave and The Bold
- The Red Circle: The Shield
- The Red Circle: The Hangman
- The Red Circle: The Web
- Samaritan X
- Superman
- Superman: Earth One
- Wonder Woman
- Before Watchmen: Dr. Manhattan
- Before Watchmen: Nite Owl
- Before Watchmen: Moloch
- The Flash: Earth One.



MARVEL COMICS

CHARACTER / TEAM TITLES INCLUDE:

- The Amazing Spider-Man
- Marvel Knights Spider-Man
- Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man
- The Sensational Spider-Man
- Squadron Supreme: Supreme Power
- Squadron Supreme: Powers and Principalities
- Squadron Supreme: High Command
- Squadron Supreme: Hyperion
- Squadron Supreme: Ultimate Power
- Squadron Supreme
- Strange
- Fantastic Four
- Civil War: Fantastic Four
- Dream Police
- The Book of Lost Souls
- Bullet Points
- Ultimate Civil War: Spider-Ham
- Silver Surfer: Requiem
- Thor
- The Twelve
- Captain America



In the late summer of 2010 Straczynski himself became a hero when he rescued the Southwestern College Sun from a cabal of corrupt administrators and governing board members. The student newspaper was about to publish stories about bribery and extortion related to college construction projects when the president and two vice presidents ordered the advisor not to publish until after the November election. Advisor Dr. Max Branscomb refused to comply and found a printer in Los Angeles willing to print The Sun after former college president Raj Chopra personally called San Diego County printers and told them not to print The Sun lest they lose college contracts.

Southwestern College became a national story and the attempt to block the publication of The Sun became a firestorm of controversy. When Straczynski read about the controversy in a Hollywood newspaper he wired \$5,000 to the printer and told journalism students and faculty to “go print your newspaper.” He said he hated bullies and would not stand by while bullies targeted the newspaper at his beloved alma mater. The September 2010 issue of The Sun broke what would become known as the South Bay Corruption Scandal. Just after Christmas in 2011 the San Diego District Attorney raided the homes of nearly two dozen Southwestern College and Sweetwater Union High School District administrators and contractors. They were charged with 264 felonies. Southwestern’s new governing board majority fired 22 administrators and directors and demoted about a dozen more.

Coincidentally Branscomb, an SDSU classmate of Straczynski and a huge fan of “Babylon 5,” had an inspiring line of dialogue written by JMS taped to the cabinet above his computer when he learned Straczynski was paying to print the newspaper. “May God stand between you and all dark places you must walk.”

Branscomb nominated Straczynski for the Southwestern College Honorary Degree in 2013 and JMS delivered an inspiring commencement address encouraging students to take productive risks and embracing life’s failures as opportunities to learn.

College officials invited Straczynski to rejoin the Southwestern family. He has been a generous donor to the Southwestern College Foundation and SWC Cares, an umbrella of programs for low-income students like Straczynski himself was in the 1970s.

This year the library selected Straczynski’s “Becoming Superman” as its College Book of the Year. The critically acclaimed autobiography tells the story of his rags to riches ascendency from bullying, family dysfunction and poverty to one of America’s most successful and acclaimed writers.

The Sun had the opportunity to catch up with Straczynski for an interview about his book, his life and his future.

THE SUN: You are the first alumnus to author the College Book. How does that make you feel?

J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI:

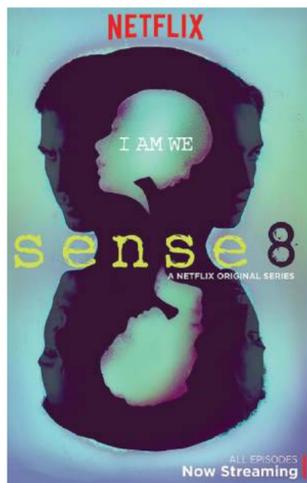


Image Courtesy of Anarchos Productions / Studio JMS / Netflix

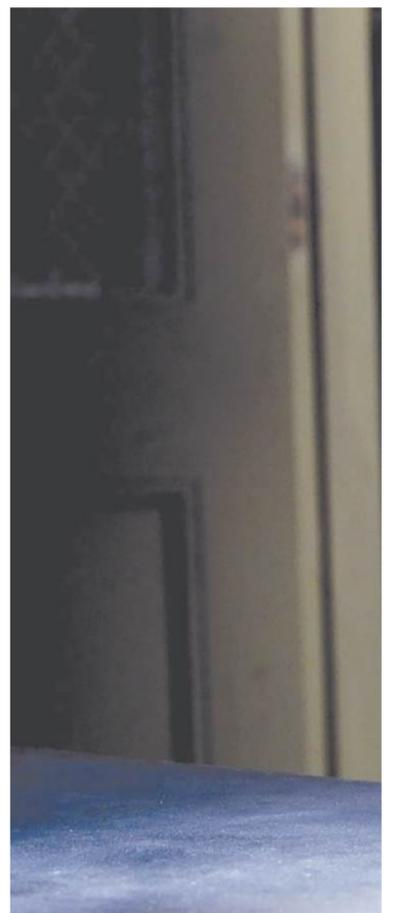


Image Courtesy of Plan B Entertainment

When I first got the news, there were a lot of mixed feelings. My very first reaction was, why would you inflict my book on so many otherwise lovely people who have never done any harm to anybody to deserve such a penalty? Then, since SWC has always been like family to me, there was that moment when you discover that your parents have read your diary, and you’re not sure what to do about having revealed so much.

Once the various psychodramas had subsided, two things remained. First, obviously, was a sense of pride, for the same reason noted above:

Art should be challenging. It should interrogate and inform, uplift, enlighten and ennobel. Showing humanity at its worst or its most dystopian is easy; it’s the low-hanging fruit of storytelling.





Logos and Images Courtesy of DC, Marvel and Joe's Comics



JOE'S COMICS

CHARACTER / TEAM TITLES INCLUDE:

- Rising Stars: Born As Fire
- Rising Stars: Power
- Rising Stars: Fire and Ash
- Rising Stars: Voices of the Dead/Bright
- Rising Stars: Visitations/Untouchable
- Midnight Nation
- Delicate Creatures
- Ten Grand
- Sidekick
- Protectors Inc
- The Adventures of Apocalypse AI
- Dream Police
- Alone
- The Book of Lost Souls.

TELEVISION

- Sense 8 (2015-18)
- Jeremiah (2002-04)
- Babylon 5 (1993-98)
- Walker, Texas Ranger (1993)
- Murder, She Wrote (1991-93)
- Jake and the Fatman (1990)
- Nightmare Classics (1989)
- Captain Power and the Soldiers of the Future (1987-88)
- Spiral Zone (1987)
- The Real Ghostbusters (1986-90)
- The Twilight Zone (1986-90)
- Jayce and the Wheeled Warriors (1985)
- She-Ra: Princess of Power (1985)
- He-Man and the Masters of the Universe (1984-85)



Image Courtesy of Marvel



Image Courtesy of Screen Gems / Lakeshore Entertainment / Sketch Films



Image Courtesy of LA Times

SWC is family, and that this family has elected to collectively read something of mine is a tremendous compliment. Second, and maybe more important, a sense of fulfilled purpose. I wrote the book to say that it doesn't matter where you come from, or if you have an odd last name, or if you don't have any friends or family or resources, you have the potential to achieve your dreams. The arc of my dreams ran straight through Southwestern College, and I think that makes the message even more personal and relatable. It can happen, it did happen, and it happened right here.

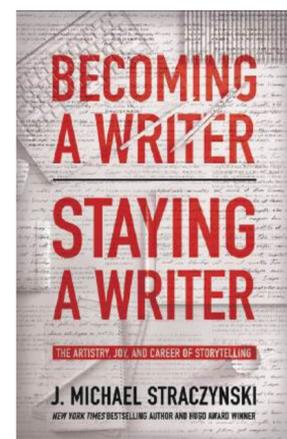
THE SUN: You have become such an important part of Southwestern College heritage. You are an Honorary Degree recipient. You have been very generous to the institution. Why is Southwestern College important to you?

JMS: In a way, that's kind of like asking why is air important? My experience at Southwestern was absolutely essential to my success as a writer. I found the right instructors and the support they gave at exactly the right moment. It was Bill Virchis, head of the theater department at the time, who produced my very first one-act plays there on campus (and later commissioned a full-length play for summer stock). Mark Twain said you learn things picking up a cat by the tail. You can learn no other way. The same applies to seeing your work produced in front of an audience: you see the flaws, the weaknesses, the bits that don't work...and what does.

But even more to the point: I attended four colleges: three community colleges (including SWC) and one university (SDSU). My experiences with the staff, students and teachers at SWC was nonpareil, totally unmatched by the other three. There was an individualism to their approach to teaching, a personal touch that was lacking in every other college I attended. You got the sense the staff and faculty were genuinely interested in you, and in seeing to it that you succeeded, rather than just being a degree factory that stamped your diploma and sent you on your



Image Courtesy of Imagine Entertainment



NON-FICTION

- Becoming a Writer, Staying a Writer: The Artistry, Joy, and Career of Storytelling (2021)
- Becoming Superman: My Journey from Poverty to Hollywood (2019)
- The Complete Book of Scriptwriting (1982)



way. More simply still: they cared. And that is unspeakably rare in the world of academia.

And the thing is, they still do. That sense of care and investment with every student on an individual basis is as much in evidence right now as it was when I attended SWC. Which is why I've donated to – and urge my fans to also donate to – the JAG Kitchen, which is yet another way for the staff to demonstrate their interest in the well-being of the students.

(It should be noted that in addition to attending four colleges, I also attended four high schools, and only found that same positive, individualized attitude toward students at Chula Vista High School. That there's a cycle of connection between CVHS and SWC reinforces my sense that there's something kinda magical going on.)

THE SUN: When did you realize you wanted to make a living as a writer?

JMS: I always had that knowledge, even if only on a cellular level, for as long as I can remember. It concretized into a full-blown decision when I was a kid in school and realized the impact that stories could have, to make something that wasn't real feel that it was. It's a little like sorcery. But I think there's a difference between that initial desire to be a writer, and the notion of making a living as a writer. The latter possibility never even occurred to me until much later.

THE SUN: You started out as a journalist at San Diego State and you wrote for many local papers. How did journalism prepare you for your career as a fiction writer?

JMS: Being a reporter gave me my first experiences with seeing my work in print, and there's something about having your name on a published byline that suddenly makes the idea of being a writer (or reporter) very real. Probably the most important part of that experience was that it taught me to hit deadlines, and how to shut down the world and just write. When you walk in the door and the editor says they need 18 column inches of material by lunchtime, there's no time for self-doubt or waiting around endlessly for the elusive Muse to show up: you get behind the keyboard, make the world go away, and write whatever it is until it's done. I suppose it's a kind of muscle-memory that persists to this day.

THE SUN: Why do you love science fiction?

JMS: Writers write what gets caught in our filter. As a kid living in demonstrably horrific circumstances (as described in *Becoming Superman*), comic books and science fiction stories took me out of that situation into something far away. It was a form of escape. And to a degree, it still is. But that said, I also like to work in other genres, from mainstream (the movie *Changeling*) to police procedurals, historical drama and the like.

THE SUN: Your writing can be very philosophical. In our age of superficiality and voyeurism is it important to you to make people consider our better selves?

JMS: Very often you'll hear someone say they just want to go out to see a movie or watch a TV show and "I just want to be entertained." And that's fair. By the same token, to be entertained is the absolute baseline requirement



Image Courtesy of DC

“At every stage of my life, there has been someone to point the way to something better. A writer I admired. A teacher. Other students who befriended and supported me. Superman.”

J MICHAEL STRACZINYSKI

we can and should expect, or you're being boring and didactic. The question becomes, what more can a story or a piece of art offer than simple entertainment? Art should be challenging, it should interrogate and inform, uplift, enlighten and ennoble. Showing humanity at its worst or its most dystopian is easy; it's the low-hanging fruit of storytelling. It's much harder – and hence less often done – to show humanity at its best without seeming corny or self-indulgent. But it's absolutely necessary to remind people that the human race has value, that we are made stronger by our differences, and that our stubborn nobility, the common coin of our shared humanity, is what will ultimately call us into the future. That is the proper role of art: to celebrate the human condition without looking

away from our faults and flaws, to summon us to become something better and nobler.

THE SUN: Please talk for a moment about your favorite all-time writer.

JMS: That's a very hard question to answer because the reply changes depending on what kind of writing we're talking about. I will confess that I'm a Shakespeare nut. There's a reason those plays are still being produced, analyzed and dissected hundreds of years after his birth. But that's the popular, easy answer. Growing up, for me, that would probably be Rod Serling, creator and chief writer for the original *Twilight Zone*. His stories were solidly based on character, logic and relentless structure, and leaned into the ideas expressed in my prior answer. He wrote about prejudice and bigotry and violence and the threat of fascism, bringing those themes into the world of usually very sanitized television science fiction. But he also celebrated kindness, compassion, charity and strength. Rod could do things with language and form that I'm still trying to figure out.

THE SUN: Who is your favorite contemporary writer?

JMS: Up until his passing a few years ago, it would be Harlan Ellison, who was also a friend and long-distance mentor in the years before we actually met. His stories were excellent, but it was the person behind the stories that inspired me most. He would write essays that accompanied his stories talking about the necessity of courage in the life of an artist, the willingness,

and the necessity, of confronting venality, stupidity, cupidity and corruption in government, but also in the arts themselves, in particular the ways in which people with money and power could control or censor that art. Harlan taught me to fight for the primacy of the work and for that I owe him greatly.

THE SUN: What is your all-time favorite television show?

JMS: The *Twilight Zone*, for all the reasons noted above.

THE SUN: What is your all-time favorite film?

JMS: I don't know how or if this fits in with the definition of a film – though it was indeed filmed, and exhibited – but I have watched *Hamilton*, first on stage then via Disney+, more times than I care to admit. I think it's about as perfect a work of art as I've ever seen. Flawless storytelling, performances and music. Just freaking stunning.

THE SUN: Do you have an all-time favorite JMS project? If so, please tell me about it and why you are fond of it.

JMS: It would have to be the TV series I created, wrote and produced, *Babylon 5*. It's the first show I ever created, and I was able to write nearly all of it without studio interference. It allowed me the freedom to talk about some of the issues that I care about while at the same time letting me show the process of going from a state of peace, to war, and the aftermath. It dealt with a pliant media, political cowardice and corruption, diversity, and a ton of other issues. It's a tad dated visually, but overall, yeah, that's it.

THE SUN: In "*Becoming Superman*" you describe a nomadic existence as a child and teenager. For those who have not yet read your book, would you share with us why Chula Vista is so special to you?

JMS: As someone who was always the new kid every time I moved (21 times in my first 17 years) I was a prime target for bullies because I didn't have a posse to back me up. I was always the loner. The only kids who ever noticed me were the bullies, everybody else either looked away, because you don't want to associate with the kid getting beat up because you might be next or were simply unaware of my existence. I was to all intents and purposes invisible...until I came to Chula Vista, when I was noticed – in

a good way for a change – by some of the students and teachers. For the first time I had friends and adults who believed in me. I can't begin to express what a transformational moment that was. For the first time I was also being asked to write stories and little, short plays that were produced at CVHS and, later, Southwestern. Chula Vista is where I started to become the writer that I am now, and the person I like to think that I am, and I will never be able to fully repay that debt.

THE SUN: Dr. Branscomb tells all his journalism students the story of the time in 2010 when you paid for the issue of *The Sun* that broke the story of the South Bay Corruption Scandal. Senior employees at Southwestern say that publication may have saved the college because it exposed so much criminal behavior and cleaned out the corrupt leadership that had so damaged the college. Did you know so much was at stake when you paid for that issue?

JMS: No, I was only aware of a fraction of what was going on. All I knew was that the issue was being repressed and suppressed by the Powers at SWC for reasons of their own, to cover up their conduct and shut down the newspaper, and that was really all I needed to know. As hinted at above, I don't like bullies of any stripe, whether they were other schoolkids, or adults in suits and ties who think they're immune to scrutiny or penalty and were using every trick in the book to maintain that status. Watching the fireworks launched after the issue came out was one of my proudest moments.

THE SUN: Comic books inspired me to learn how to read and write in English when I was a little girl. In your biography you talk about how important comics were to you. Would you please tell me about the role comic books played in your life?

JMS: More than anything else they were an escape from a fairly brutal existence. I could go someplace far, far away from my life, into a place where the good guys and gals won (most of the time), and the characters operated from a moral center that my family lacked. When I got beat up, at home or at school, I'd force myself to believe that I was invulnerable, that nothing could hurt me. As I got older, comics (*Superman* in particular), taught me the importance of hope, and kindness, and fighting for a just cause even when the odds were against you. I still try to honor those lessons as an adult.

At every stage of my life, there has been someone to point the way to something better. A writer I admired. A teacher. Other students who befriended and supported me. Superman. Through these and others, I was able to learn, almost too late, that I wasn't alone. A casual kind word or gesture, an expression of interest or belief in someone, and just this much charity can have outsized, profound effects on people in need, and I would tell one group reading this to remember that as dark as things can get at times, you are not alone...and I would tell the other group reading this to make sure the people in your life know this. You can do more than help create their careers. You can put on the cape and save their lives.

And really, how often in life does that opportunity present itself?