

Cultivating Justice

By Bethany Powers '11, Photos by Edward Carreon

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He's organized a hunger strike for gardeners but he's also written children's stories. He's an accomplished academic but also a passionate activist who in 2005 was honored with the Charles E. Young Humanitarian Award for creating the Gardener Leadership Development Project. Alvaro Huerta '03, M.A. '06 is the face of the new America, bridging the gap between scholarship and social activism, bringing to both the insights and perspective of a son of Mexican immigrants.

Huerta, currently studying city and urban planning at UC Berkeley and a visiting scholar at UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, says his goal is to understand "how people find ways to make an honest living and collect census information of undocumented workers, to figure out how they organize and how they survive in a hostile economy."

"He's heading into an entirely new type of work, what I'd call an academic practitioner," says Leo Estrada, a professor in the Department of Urban Planning, who has known Huerta for over eight years. "He conducts research, writes, and teaches, but also has a foot in the community. He's created this new kind of entity."

Huerta grew up in East Los Angeles, a neighborhood where there was constant pressure to join gangs and no expectations to even graduate from high school. "There are a lot of American myths, like you can lift yourself up from your bootstraps," he says about that experience. "But what happens when you don't own boots to begin with? This implies that you have something when you have nothing."

For the Kids
Check out *The Dreamer*, Huerta's most recent funny tale.

Huerta has organized a hunger strike for gardeners in Los Angeles and has advocated on other Chicano issues but although he is still passionate about these and other causes, he is currently focusing his time energy and time on scholarship, working on a qualitative history of Mexican gardeners in the U.S.

And as his children's author alter ego, Huerta's humorous stories have been featured in *The Los Angeles Times*. Huerta says he was primarily responsible for teaching himself to read and write, and through his own work, he wants to show kids that anybody can write catchy and engaging stories.

"I write a lot for my son, Joaquin," he explains. "These stories relate to inner-city kids; everything they see is negative about their circumstances, and I want to make it funny for kids and shed some light on their situation."

But creativity certainly runs in the family. Alvaro's brother, Salomon Huerta M.F.A. '98, is a celebrated painter who also had to navigate L.A.'s mean streets to realize his dream.

As for the younger Huerta, Alvaro may be a new kind of scholar/activist, but his goal is illuminating the lives and challenges of immigrant gardeners and others is timeless. "I want to reach out and be their voice," he says.

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