

UCLA News

Former Congressman Esteban Torres to be awarded UCLA Medal

The campus's highest honor will go to a person whose life's work was giving voice to Latinos and laborers



In this photo from 1980, Esteban Torres and President Jimmy Carter confer next to Marine One, the presidential helicopter. Carter appointed Torres ambassador to UNESCO and, later, special assistant to the president for Hispanic affairs. Courtesy UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Jessica Wolf | July 21, 2020

Esteban Torres, labor organizer and a lawmaker who was among the first Latino congressmen from California in the 20th century, will receive the UCLA Medal, the campus' highest honor, in a virtual ceremony Wednesday, July 22.

Torres served eight terms in the House of Representatives giving voice to the largely Latino population in California's 34th district, which includes parts of downtown, Boyle Heights and East L.A. His early activism centered on his role in the United Auto Workers union. Torres also served as an ambassador to UNESCO and later as special adviser to President Jimmy Carter.

“At UCLA, we teach our students to care deeply and work hard, to seek common ground and prize the public good, to build bridges and create pathways for those who come behind,” said UCLA Chancellor Gene Block. “Esteban Torres has done all of that and more.”

The Chicano Studies Research Center is home to Torres's extensive personal papers representing his life's work from the late 1940s to the end of the 1990s. His efforts related to the National Latino Media Council, for which Torres served as chair after his time in Congress ended in 1999 until 2016 are part of the National Hispanic Media Coalition papers at the UCLA Library.

“His life is exemplary of the standards that are represented in UCLA's mission as a public university,” said Chon Noriega, director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and professor in the School of Theater, Film and Television. “It's an honor for us at UCLA to be part of his life. And I'm incredibly honored that the center and UCLA will be the steward of his legacy.”

Torres, who has also been renowned as an artist and advocate for diversity in media, was born in Arizona in 1930 but moved to East Los Angeles with his mother and grandmother in 1936, shortly after his father was deported to Mexico. He attended public school in East L.A. and graduated from Garfield High School in 1949.

For many years Torres attended the graduation ceremony at the local high school named in his honor, sharing personal stories of struggle and hope that the students could relate to, said Los Angeles Unified School District board member Mónica García.

After serving in Germany during the Korean War, the GI Bill made it possible for Torres to study at the Los Angeles Art Center in the 50s. He once harbored dreams of teaching in the fine arts, but took a job as a welder in an auto plant to support his growing family. Though Torres eventually became steward of his local chapter of United Auto Workers, which launched his public service career, he never let go of his love of art.

For the first several years after its launch, Torres served as board chair of LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes, a non-profit museum and cultural center located in downtown Los Angeles that serves as the only museum documenting and celebrating the Latino history of the city.

“He was very instrumental in getting the plaza to the point where it is today,” said John Echeveste, CEO of [LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes](#). “We had a tremendous period of growth during that period and laid a lot of the groundwork for a lot of the programs and infrastructure that is in place now.”

The museum had the opportunity to display some of Torres' artwork several years ago, including sketches and sculpture.

“We were all really amazed at how talented he was,” Echeveste said. “He kept all these sketchbooks of foreign dignitaries he had drawn in places he visited.”

In 2010, a high school bearing his name was opened in East Los Angeles.

“When we created the first school in over 80 years in East Los Angeles, I was on the board and we knew we wanted to name the school for someone from the community,” García said. “He was our congressman formally for so long, but to many people he was a community partner, a national leader, adviser and elder statesman, someone who could be a thought partner and solution builder.”

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