

UC SANTA BARBARA

# THE *Current*

October 26, 2015

Marge Pamintuan Perko

## **To the Stars and Beyond**

Hundreds gathered at this weekend's Dream Luncheon honoring NASA astronaut José Hernández with the Distinguished Alumni Award from the UC Santa Barbara Alumni Association. The event also celebrated UCSB's achievement as a Hispanic-Serving Institution and was a benefit for the Dream Scholars Fund for underprivileged and underrepresented UCSB students.

The son of migrant farmers, Hernández was 12 years old when he learned to speak English. A first generation college student, Hernández graduated from UC Santa Barbara with a master's degree in electrical and computer engineering in 1986. He went on to the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory where he developed digital equipment to detect breast cancer.

Pursuing a childhood dream inspired by watching the first moon landing on television, Hernández tried — and failed — 11 times to become a NASA astronaut. On his 12th attempt, Hernández was assigned to the crew of the Space Shuttle mission STS-128, sent to orbit the Earth in 2008.

Congressman Tony Cárdenas, also a UCSB engineering alumnus, described Hernández as the embodiment of the American dream. "The sky's the limit, we always say," said Cárdenas. "But José has proved the sky is not the limit. Very few people can say 'I've orbited the Earth.' The sky is no longer the limit."

"Anything is possible as long as you have the perseverance," said Hernandez after he accepted the Distinguished Alumni Award. "The sky's not the limit — the stars

are. I'm living proof of that."

In the years since Cárdenas and Hernández were students, Hispanic enrollment at UCSB has more than doubled. Bill Villa, former director of admissions, remembered back to 1967 when only 144 Hispanic students were enrolled at the university. "It took 45 years to meet the 20 percent minimum enrollment," Villa noted in his speech at the luncheon. This year, Hispanic students make up 27 percent of UCSB's total student population.

Recent alumni, such as Manuel Perez, already feel the difference in campus attitudes toward their community. "When I look back to when I came here as a freshman, the atmosphere was very different," said the former member of Los Ingenieros, a student organization for Hispanic STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) majors. He graduated with a degree in computer engineering in 2014.

(Note: During his time at UCSB, Hernández also was a member of Los Ingenieros.)

Perez's fellow alum and Los Ingenieros member Alfonso Millan graduated the same year with a degree in mechanical engineering. "Something like this, I would have never imagined it when I was going to school here," he said. "It seems like for the first time, you can focus on being a student."

Like the congressman and the former astronaut, Millan is also the son of migrant workers. He was a member of IDEAS (Improving Dreams Equality Access and Success), an organization for undocumented students founded by Laura Flores, another UCSB graduate. "It's nice to be back to a space that is more welcoming to undocumented students like myself," said Flores, who advocated for the Dream Scholarship Fund after it was established in 2013.

Student leaders like Associated Student Advocate General Joseline Garcia, the daughter of immigrant parents, want to keep pushing for progress. "Seeing these stories and hearing their struggles motivates me," said Garcia, a senior majoring in global studies. "Like Jose Hernández's parents, my parents took the first steps for success in the second generation."

This school year, 300 undocumented students are enrolled at UCSB. "For first generation migrant students, scholarships are the only way to make it," said Habiba Simjee, the campus's undocumented student services coordinator. "The community is coming together and really showing we have important goals for diversity and

inclusiveness. There was great energy in the room when we spoke about the Dream Scholarship and what we want to accomplish.”

---

## **About UC Santa Barbara**

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.