UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

February 1, 2023
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With $500,000 raised, the Ismael ‘Mayo’ de la Rocha Endowed Scholarship opens doors for underserved students with activism in their hearts

In the breezeway that cuts through North Hall at UC Santa Barbara, a photo mural lines each side with scenes from a 1968 campus protest. Aiming to call attention to racism and unequal treatment of those who didn’t see themselves reflected in academia, 12 Black students barricaded themselves in the building. A large crowd gathered outside, among them a small group of Latino students who had recently formed the United Mexican American Students (UMAS) and stood in support of a takeover.

In that crowd — and in one of the mural photos, bullhorn in hand — was Ismael “Mayo” de la Rocha ’73. He was then an undergraduate student, still new to UC Santa Barbara, but already an engaged activist.

A short time later, de la Rocha helped to draft “El Plan de Santa Barbara,” a blueprint for the Chicana and Chicano studies and research departments, the release of which motivated the formation of UCSB’s department — the first in the UC system — the Educational Opportunity Program, and El Centro Arnulfo Casillas. El

Centro became the center of the Chicana and Chicano experience on campus, serving as a refuge for generations of students as the university grew into one of the nation's top Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI).

And it is all part of de la Rocha's legacy as an ardent champion for social justice and advocate for the Chicana and Chicano community.

"Mayo devoted his entire life to the movement, *la lucha*, fighting for workers' rights, civil rights and human rights," said Cástulo de la Rocha '73, de la Rocha's cousin and fellow student activist. "Both on campus and beyond, Mayo was a passionate student advocate, a beloved teacher and mentor, who encouraged his students to achieve greatness, create change and give back to their communities."

Inspired by de la Rocha's legacy, Cástulo, president and CEO of AltaMed Health Services, along with his wife Zoila Escobar and de la Rocha's son Michael de la Rocha, created the Ismael "Mayo" de la Rocha Endowed Scholarship. With the generous support of university leaders, other alumni, family and friends, de la Rocha's family helped the campus raise $500,000 for the fund that provides financial assistance to first-generation, working class Latinx college students who demonstrate a commitment to social justice, community involvement and activism.

"The Mayo de la Rocha Scholarship entails the highest values of social sciences, and our entire campus, and in fulfilling the mandate of our much-celebrated status as an HSI," said Charles R. Hale, the SAGE Sara Miller McCune Dean of Social Sciences at UC Santa Barbara. "Funding provided by the scholarship delivers on the 'S' in HSI in two distinct ways: helping to assure the academic success of stellar Latinx undergraduates and giving these students additional impetus to serve their communities and the broader society, toward the ideals of equity and social justice that both Cástulo's and Mayo's lives so richly embody."

Born in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, Cástulo and de la Rocha moved to California in adolescence and attended the same schools in East Los Angeles. As students and activists at UC Santa Barbara at the same time, both were deeply engaged in *el movimiento*, the Chicana and Chicano Movement.

The son of a bracero worker and seamstress, de la Rocha struggled to acclimate to university life and to succeed academically. But he worked hard and did both,

earning bachelor’s and master’s degrees. His challenges, as much as his activism, informed his future focus on helping students and inspired his life’s work as an esteemed college educator. For 40 years, he taught history at Ventura College, in addition to teaching at UCSB, CSU Northridge, CSU Channel Islands, and universities across Latin America.

An activist to the core, de la Rocha also took part in the Chicano Moratorium, organizing with the United Farm Workers, and helping to establish the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA) at UC Santa Barbara, for which he also served as a faculty advisor at Ventura College..

“UC Santa Barbara takes great pride in our long-standing commitment to cultivating an inclusive community where each and every student can reach their highest potential,” said Chancellor Henry Yang. “It has been an honor to work together with Dean Hale and our alumnus Cástulo de la Rocha to further this shared commitment by realizing this ambitious fundraising goal for the Ismael ‘Mayo’ de la Rocha Endowed Scholarship Fund. We are immensely grateful to our devoted alumni and friends who generously contributed to the fund, which further propels our campus's ability to support our students, and allows us to uphold Mayo’s rich legacy by raising up the next generation of leaders dedicated to activism and public service.”

Profiled in the Ventura County Star in 2009, de la Rocha said, “I see myself in my students. I see them struggling, where they feel they can’t make it ... We have a responsibility to open the door even wider.”

Which is exactly the intent of the Mayo Scholarship: to open the door for students with financial need who are pursuing degrees in Chicana and Chicano studies, are Dream Scholars or are studying medical humanities and are committed to giving back to their communities.

“Our father taught my brother and I the importance of community, giving back and making the world a better place,” said Michael de la Rocha, Mayo’s son. “Every day, in all that we do, we make sure to honor his legacy, and we are thrilled to see these students also carry forward our father’s fight.”

“Mayo, while teaching, was really an activist, at the grassroots level, totally committed to the community, improving the wellbeing of underserved populations,” Cástulo de la Rocha said. “His entire life, the man was devoted to social justice. And

so I had the idea to start a memorial scholarship in honor of Mayo, recognizing the great work he'd done and the thousands of students that he influenced over the course of his career.

"I am deeply appreciative of Dean Hale, Chancellor Yang and the university for their efforts and their commitment to bringing resources to students in Chicana and Chicano studies at UC Santa Barbara," he added. "I believe it sends a strong message to Latino communities."

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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.