

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Alex Fabros, 80, makes history at UCSB

Flash back 25 years. Alex Fabros was on track to earn a Ph.D. in history from UC Santa Barbara. At the time, he was a favorite teacher and mentor among many Asian-American studies students, captivating them with heroic and horrific stories from his soldiering days during the Vietnam War. Perhaps even more compelling were his office hours, held aboard the 40-foot sailboat he called home, often anchored in calm water between Campus Point and Goleta Pier. Then one day on a sailing trip, Fabros's laptop — the sole repository of years of doctoral data — slid off its desk and crashed and died against the hardwood floor.

"It really didn't bother me that much," Fabros said recently. At that point, he remembered, he'd already done the important part — the work — and he was also pleased with what he had accomplished during his life in general. He figured it wasn't worth the effort to reassemble his dissertation from scratch. Eventually, however, his wife and daughters encouraged him to reconsider. "My kids started bugging me about it," he said.

Two decades later, a friend with expertise in data retrieval offered to help. Soon enough, Fabros's dissertation, a treatise on Anglo-conformity in Fresno, Calif., was back from the dead. And on June 11, Alex S. Fabros Jr., who turned 80 in May, becomes the oldest Ph.D. recipient in UCSB history.

Fabros's road to the UCSB commencement stage began in the small farming towns of his childhood in Central California, son of a Filipino-American soldier and Filipino

mother.

Soldiering and sailing

After high school, Fabros dropped out of community college and worked as a farm laborer before drafting into the Marine Corps, in 1964, as the war in Vietnam escalated. His farmworker strength, he remembered, served him well through bootcamp and he had a knack for language learning. He became a squad leader in short order.

After two tours in Vietnam, Fabros emerged a highly trained and decorated sergeant. But he also suffered from shellshock, a psychological affliction coined in World War I and better known today as post-traumatic stress disorder. Among his demons were memories of rage and sorrow after enemy soldiers had slaughtered Vietnamese families in a rural village where Fabros and his platoon had provided medical assistance, he said. "After that, it was take no prisoners."

Returning stateside in 1971, he was assigned to Marine Corps Barracks on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay, where he bought a 30-foot sailboat and taught himself to sail.

"I could go out there by myself and do figure eights in the bay," he remembered. "I liked the solitude and it was clearing my head." Learning along the way, Fabros soon sailed solo to Hawaii. He kept going. By the time he reached Tahiti, he was ready to start a new chapter. "You can only sit on a beach and drink beer for so long," he remembered. He sold his boat and reenlisted, this time in the Army as a second lieutenant.

In 1975, the Army sent him to the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey to study computers. In the mid-1980s, he helped coordinate networks between UCSB and various military nodes. This Advanced Research Projects Agency Network, or ARPANET, as it was called, was the direct predecessor of the modern internet.

While sailing trips and staying busy kept his psychological demons at bay, his time at war had also haunted his physical health. In 1990, Fabros suffered a massive heart attack and the recurrence of an earlier diagnosis of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, both linked to Agent Orange exposure in Vietnam. (He's had more than a dozen heart attacks since and two open-heart surgeries.)

Back to school

After his medical retirement from the Army in 1992, Fabros became a research professor in Asian-American studies at San Francisco State University. He earned his master's degree in ethnic studies and, for 1996-97, was selected as a CSU Sally Casanova Scholar, a competitive program supporting students preparing for doctoral study and faculty careers. "I was interested in Filipino-American history," he said.

With support from the UC President's Research Fellowships in the Humanities, he arrived at UCSB in 1997. Part of the appeal, he remembered, was the university's proximity to Santa Barbara Harbor and the Channel Islands.

At the same time, however, he felt friction on campus. "I was nontraditional," Fabros said. "I was a former Army officer and Marine sergeant. I had killed people in combat. And some of these guys on campus were anti-war back in the '60s and '70s and they carried that bias with them."

Unfazed, Fabros set his course. "By the time I got to UCSB, I already knew something about discipline," he said. "UCSB taught me how to turn discipline into scholarship."

"In Fresno I had noticed that minorities are relegated to certain parts of town," he added. "I wanted to find out how that happened."

"No one had told the racial story of Fresno before," said UCSB history professor Paul Spickard, who headed up Fabros's dissertation committee. "Alex's dissertation illuminates how the east side of Fresno has remained stable and almost all white, while the west side of town has been home to a succession of racialized groups — Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Blacks and Mexicans, among others — and has been consistently poorer."

Fabros explained that by 1965, before the federal Fair Housing Act gave stronger legal tools against housing discrimination, "Fresno's racial geography had already hardened into the built environment. What resulted was more than residential separation. It was unequal citizenship written into land, credit, streets, schools, public works, and memory."

Heading toward commencement, Fabros reflected, “I think it’s the journey I was supposed to start back in 1964, before I dropped out of college. And I think my mother would be happy about it.”

To fellow graduates he would say, “You have done something difficult — now do something meaningful with it.”

Tags

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