

9-16-1998

Ernesto Galarza: Mentor and Friend

Jose D. Villa

San Jose State University, angelacvilla@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/josevilla_archive



Part of the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Villa, Jose D., "Ernesto Galarza: Mentor and Friend" (1998). *Jose D. Villa Archive*. 2.
http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/josevilla_archive/2

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Cultural Heritage Center at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jose D. Villa Archive by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

ERNESTO GALARZA: MENTOR AND FRIEND

Presentation to the Chicano/Latino Faculty and Staff Association

14th Annual Dr. Ernesto Galarza Scholarship Symposium

San José State University, San José, California

September 16, 1998

by José D. Villa

¡Quisiera felicitarlos por lo que han cumplido! Everyone in this room has a right to feel proud of what has happened today. The City of San José, in Silicon Valley, has finally memorialized the heroic work of Dr. Ernesto Galarza. It is altogether fitting and proper that on this day, el diéz y séis de septiembre, 1998, the little "Barrio Boy" from Jalcoctan, Nayarit, Mexico, the indomitable advocate for social justice and educational opportunity, should be so honored.

In addition to his considerable contributions in behalf of farmworkers and the Mexican American community, did you know that he was also the only American to have received *El Orden Del Condor*, or The Order of the Condor, Bolivia's highest award in recognition of his report to the U. S. Government which severely criticized the tin cartel's repression of striking miners? And that he was the recipient of the highest award by the Spanish Speaking world for his contributions to children's literature? The accolades go on and on, and well they should.

But this evening I simply wish to share with you my life and times with Ernesto Galarza, my friend and mentor. We all need mentors to guide us through times of doubt, confusion and conflict; and friends to provide a shelter where one can find warmth, comfort, and rest. Ernesto was both to me.

One evening a group of us went to Ernesto's home to talk to him about the School of Social Work, and I fell asleep on his couch. When someone tried to wake me up he told him to let me rest, that I obviously needed it. Apologetically, I tried to explain that I was tired because of the many demands on campus. He waved off my *disculpa* and added that I could

have the couch anytime I needed rest. I returned to that couch so many times I practically wore it out. On one of those occasions, I was up to my armpits in alligators working as Interim Dean of the Social Work Program and was feeling somewhat insecure because I was responsible for the work of many PhDs. I asked him if he thought I should go for a PhD myself. He laughed heartily and said I didn't need one. But he added that if I absolutely had to have one he would give me his.

Ernesto was gentle and very spiritual. He had a great faith in himself and in those with whom he lived and worked. Both he and Mae graciously welcomed me, my wife Clare and our children into their home. They absolutely enchanted our children. Once Ernesto even asked them to pose on a dairy farm so that he could use their pictures to illustrate one of his famous mini-libros, *La Historia Verdadera De Una Botella De Leche*, The True Story Of A Bottle Of Milk. And likewise, our children seemed to enchant them as well. One Christmas Clare and the kids made an entire Christmas manger scene out of gingerbread, decorated all the pieces with icing and gave the whole thing to the Galarzas as a holiday gift. Later Mae wrote them a note saying "we enjoyed the Christmas scene all during the holidays, and then we did the obvious thing: we ate it!"

In retrospect, I suspect that Ernesto took this "up close and personal" interest in me and my family because he saw in us a continuation - an extension, perhaps - of himself and his own struggles with life. Ernesto and his mother came to this country in 1910, escaping from the Mexican Revolution, as did my parents. The journey was neither comfortable nor safe for traveling folks at that time and in that place. My father first mentioned something about it when I was about five or six, after he and our family had been in New Mexico for almost twenty-five years. He had us boys helping him build a sturdy rock wall in front of our adobe house in Clovis, New Mexico. It was a hot summer day, and being just a little boy at the time, I protested loudly about having to work so hard on this great wall reinforced with all sorts of bedsprings, barbed wire and other paraphernalia. To my surprise and bewilderment, my father's response to my impertinence was, "*Por esta pared no pasan*

balas." (Bullets can't penetrate this wall.) It wasn't until many years later, while I was studying Mexican history as a student at the University of New Mexico, that I began to understand what he meant. Of course, when I related this to Ernesto on one of my couch-sitting sessions, he understood instantly what my father had said to his small son, and why. This was the kind of yarn that ties men's souls together:

By the way, if any of you are interested in taking a peek at the realities of the suffering and sacrifices - and yes, joys - that entire families endured to get to this country from Mexico in the early days of this century, you would be well advised to read Ernesto's autobiography, "*Barrio Boy*," as well as Victor Villaseñor's compelling historic novels, "*Lluvia de Oro*" (Rain of Gold) and Wild Steps of Heaven. These three books ought to be required reading for every adult in this country!

Small wonder that one of Ernesto's underlying themes of life was documenting the injustices visited upon farmworkers, like his family and mine. To me, his poem, "The Wetbacks" speaks volumes about what motivated his work. When I read it, I can hear my father speaking in Spanish.

Listen.

Pardon, Sir, that we come to molest you.

We have shame, but the necessity obliges us.

Only a little moment we will take from you.

Our difficulty is in this wise:

We three companions worked for a Patron

on a ranch this side of Niland.

To us he promised fifty cents an hour

and one whole loaf of bread,

some beans and milk, perhaps.

And he disposed that we should sleep beneath a tree

also to take the water from the ditch.

We cut the weeds and lifted up the melon vines
until last Friday, when the Patron excused himself
to see a doctor for the throat
in San Diego.

He advised us to stay beneath the tree
because he said it is the law
that such as us will lose the wage
if the Immigration apprehends us
on the public road.

Three days, Sir, we passed beneath the tree
and drank the water from the ditch
until the necessity and the hunger
animated us to leave behind our sad situation.

Thanks to God, the Immigration was not up the road
and someone told us you might give us counsel.

If we could have our wages, Sir,
or only such a part as would be just,
we would go back to Michoacan.

We three companions are from there,
a place called Once Pueblos, where
you have your modest house, Sir.

We are grateful for the cooperation.

God will repay you.(1)

Dr. Galarza was perceptive about and sensitive to all common human needs. But he reserved his sharpest criticism for institutions and systems that oppressed farmworkers, children, and families. He spoke about institutions inflicting pain on people through

institutional deviancy which deprived them of moral and statutory commitment. To a group of mental health workers he stated

Another institution I want to mention is that of education. What have the public schools of the Southwest done with relation to the Mexican child? They have in general become deviant institutions, primarily because they have attempted to force the Mexican child into a cultural mold at the very beginning of his contact with the school that has damaged the Mexican child, particularly in languages. A struggle has been going on for many, many years to get schools to understand that when a child shows up for school on his first day in his first grade and doesn't speak English, somebody should be there to speak to him in Spanish! If there aren't books in Spanish from which he can read, then somebody should write them and publish them and get them into the schools. Up to the last five years the schools have resisted this effort and have said, "Well, this Mexican kid is in the United States, and English is our language. Let him learn it. It is his responsibility." This kind of closed-mindedness has damaged more than one generation of Mexican culture. What we need in most western states is to turn the first four grades of instruction upside down, demolish the present curriculum, destroy the present administrative system which creates a pyramid of power which holds the teachers in fear. In short, it is high time we gave our thoughts to educational reform of the American public schools.(2)

HOW APPROPRIATE THESE OBSERVATIONS ARE TODAY!!!

During academic year 1970-71 while I was Chair of the Mexican American Graduate Studies Program at San José State and Dr. Galarza was the Distinguished Scholar in Residence (appointed through the School of Education), he approached me to work with him on several projects. I was about to learn from the master how to view the academic

setting not as a monolithic, fossilized institution, but as a valuable resource which could be used for the development of the community.

Ernesto Galarza arrive on campus when we desperately needed him. In 1969, Chicano students had walked out of the University's commencement - protesting the university's insensitivity to the educational needs of the community. That same year Chicanos disrupted La Fiesta De Las Rosas, a City of San José celebration of the Spanish culture, which resulted in a major police confrontation. Two junior high school teachers, José Carrasco and Consuelo Rodriguez led a Chicano student walkout from Roosevelt Junior High School, with Sofia Mendoza and Jack Brito organizing parents and the community to support them. Through the Mexican American Affairs Committee, Chicano faculty and students involved the community in organizing the Chicano Educational Opportunity Program, the first Mexican American Graduate Studies Program, and the first graduate program in our country with the special mission of training professional social workers to serve the needs of Chicano communities. There was the infamous Chargin affair, and MACSA had organized the Community Alert Patrol to monitor police harrassment of Chicanos and minorities. La Confederación De La Raza Unida joined MECHA in support of La Huelga and in demanding that the rights of all people be respected.

We needed the steadying hand of Dr. Galarza, with his studiously cultivated knowledge of national and international laws, economic and social conditions, legislation, policy formulation, and research methodology. And more importantly, Dr. Galarza knew that he needed the seasoned veterans who knew how to work within institutional settings, had been baptized in the struggle for justice, and had the confidence and blessing of this community in order to advance his own work. My decision to join forces with Dr. Galarza was based on my relationship with those who were part of the struggle, and who had prepared me for his arrival on campus. The consideration that there was already a "team" of professionals and activists ready to work together with him both on and off the campus was

key. We believed in him and he believed in us. Together we demanded institutional respect and response to the needs of our families and our communities...and on our terms.

Dr. Galarza began his first project in our collaboration by engaging students, teachers, and parents in a dialogue to determine what it would take to create learning materials in Spanish for children in grades K-3 using the arts as part of a process of teaching and learning. It soon became apparent to me that his interest in the education of the Mexican American child reached far beyond academia and school walls. It considered the history, language, values, and experiences of the Mexican American people.

One of the proposals we made to the university and San José Unified School District, was to collaborate on creating a school where we could demonstrate how to carry out the concept of a bilingual, bicultural program of instruction. The timing was ideal. All of the downtown schools had been torn down because they were earthquake unsafe. We had all the requisite resources in terms of teachers and staff, curriculum, and most important, Dr. Galarza to guide us. I firmly believe the whole concept posed a serious threat to the educational establishment: we stood a good chance of success! But it was not to be.

So we tried something else. We took Dr. Galarza's concept of the Bilingual Studio Lab and set it up at the old Hoover School. That required my leaving the university and accepting a post with the San José Unified School District. We had quite a team going! What happened is a matter of record in Dr. Galarza's report addressed to me (Bilingual, Bicultural Education In The San Jose Unified School District, dated June 1, 1973), his report to the John Jay Whitney Foundation (The Studio Laboratory For Learning Materials in Spanish dated April 11, 1973) and Dr. Carrasco's report of a teacher training program (Final Report On The San José Unified School District Summer Four Week Bilingual-Bicultural Teacher Training Workshop dated August 2, 1973). Marcos Ortiz and Jack Brito were members of the team who mobilized funding resources within the school district and the Model Cities program, while many talented teachers such as Judith Garza provided valuable insight and leadership in the classroom segment of this effort.

A few years into the tenure of the Bilingual Studio Lab, a report was released which pointed out that children in the downtown schools, which were 85% Chicano, were at the bottom of the district scores. My public comments in the Mercury News in response to this report were pretty upsetting to school administrators, and soon afterward they stopped supporting the Lab. Besides reactions to my stinging remarks, another excuse used by central administration was that the district was decentralized, meaning that school principals and staff ultimately decided what was best for each school. We were effectively sandbagged! Then came others who would bring big bucks for bilingual education through a ten-district consortium, and things got pretty political. Much of the money was ill spent, and that, as history has proven, provided impetus for the opponents of bilingual education to get rid of it entirely. I'd like to add that Ernesto was the first to recognize the foibles of the consortium approach, and to point out how bilingual education had been turned into a boondoggle.

In 1973 I was hired by the Mexican American Community Services Agency, where I continued to work with Dr. Galarza, both in bilingual education services to schools and in supporting the Alviso community, his two pet projects. Dr. Galarza had obtained a Laras grant to assist Alvisans in their struggle with the City of San José. He then proceeded to teach me how to parlay that \$25,000.00 grant into seed funding to obtain other grants for MACSA, which put us on the road to becoming the successful agency we needed to be to fulfill our function in the community.

A major conflict which weighed heavily on me while I was Director of MACSA resulted from the police shooting of Danny Treviño in 1976. Ernestina Garcia, who was then Presidente de la Confederación De La Raza Unida, asked me to head up a committee to look into the matter, and from that assignment C.O.P.S. (Community Organized for Public Safety) was born. We did much more than look. We acted swiftly on many fronts. One of the most valuable lessons I learned from him at that time, was that in the heat of conflict one should always have a trusted person outside the struggle to analyze the situation and to provide objective thinking and strategic planning. Thus it was that in the midst of all the

turmoil I went to see Ernesto. *Fuí bien rendido*. I was burned out and he asked what was happening. I told him about police cars which came throughout the night shining their spotlights on our house and testing their sirens. Through clenched teeth Ernesto exclaimed, "Those sons of bitches!" It was the only time I ever heard him use any profanity. And it was then that I caught a glimpse of the "man on fire." He took the time to write me an outline of things to consider in managing the very serious issue facing COPS.

Subsequently Ernesto spoke in front of the City Council, telling them that unless they took matters in hand, they would be forced to change the community's name from "Valley of the Heart's Delight" to the "Valley of Sudden Fright." He was referring to the facts that Danny Treviño was the fifteenth police homicide in seven years, and that eight were Chicano, six were African American, and one was an Anglo. He called on the city to stop this carnage and to reform its police programs.

This all happened while Janet Gray Hayes was mayor; and when at the end of her term of office she was asked about the most difficult problem in her administration, she said it was the Treviño affair. We had made a difference.

Many months later I was visiting with Ernesto and he asked me where we stood with the Treviño shooting. I recited a bunch of stuff, pointing out where I thought the community had experienced some successes. During our conversation, I also mentioned I had loaned someone my copy of his book Farm Workers and Agri-Business and never saw it again. He smiled, went to his study, and after a little while returned with another copy for me. On the inside he had written, "*Vale más la revolución que viene que la que se fué. Un recordatorio para José Villa. de Ernesto Galarza, San José, Calif, 11-27-77*" I have given considerable thought, not so much about what he wrote, but why he wrote it. He was trying to tell me what Gandolf said to Bilboe Baggins in *The Hobbit*, and that is that the adventures which lie ahead are much more interesting than those that have passed.

One time, several years after Ernesto had died, my wife Clare decided to hand-silkscreen a poster for the Galarza symposium. In her "treasure hunt" (as she calls it)

through our library for appropriate additions to this art project, she ran across the "vale mas" quotation hidden away in the flyleaf of my Agri-Business book. It was just the theme she needed to set the stage for a loving tribute to the man we knew as Ernesto: scholar and prophet. Now today what he wrote to me in private has been etched in stone for all to see and heed. The message is still there, still apropos for all of us. But I want to point out that the total inscription on my book included the word *recordatorio* which means more than a remembrance...it means advice. And it also can mean *advertencia* or warning. What Ernesto was telling me was that in order to learn from the Trevino incident, I had to let it go and focus on more important matters. He was also saying *cuidado*...be careful with whatever you do.

Dr. Ernesto Galarza was the solitary sentinel standing before the portals of institutional injustices. His message to us is that so long as there is one lonely picket on duty, there is still hope for justice. He was telling us that we have to be constant in our vigilance and see to it that our children, our families, and our communities are respected and well served. He is also telling us to be well prepared to serve others. He was telling us to learn from our past experiences, to hold onto those values which give meaning to our lives, and to be diligent in our efforts to forge our character on what is right and just. This must be the cultural heritage we hand on to the next generation of Mexican-Americans.

Or as he so aptly put it, "There is something in the Mexican cultural tradition of the working class family into which I was born that compels me to speak out. The elements of that heritage in my case are the following:

Respeto - Consideration for individual human dignity regardless of status.

Derecho - The moral right to such consideration.

Vergüenza - The inward shame of doing violence to respeto and derecho.

Valor civil - The obligation to resist those who do such violence.(3)

I believe the following quote sums up Ernesto Galarza's commitment to us, and his expectation of our commitment to each other: "We shall see whether in a small way, we can offer some needed parts to that composite American identity of the future."(4)

En fin I would like your permission to end these comments on a very personal note. When I was very young, I took notice that my father did not go to church with us. When I asked him why his answer was, "*La vida es la religión y cada persona en tu vida es parte de tu religión.*" (Life is religion and each person in your life is part of your religion). Ernesto and all of you are part of my religion. He had a private family funeral and we didn't have a chance to say goodbye. I would like for us to do so now by listening to his poetic request entitled "Obituary" which described how he wanted to be laid to rest.

The day after the last of all my days
I will not sleep in some trim cubicle
(The prying earth has many devious ways
to violate such welded citadels.)
But you, who loved me most, ascend a stair
high on a hill, or up some city tower,
to loose my ashes on the listless air
like sun-charred petals from a cherry bower;
and I who loved you most shall be as free
and as intangible as the blown kiss
I gave you with my eyes, in agony
that death could break so sweet a synthesis.(5)

And I cannot conceive of a better response than what Mae wrote, a copy of which she presented to me on June 4, 1991.

I, who loved you most, and your two daughters are here to scatter
the ashes of our beloved one in accordance with the wishes
of your poem "obituary".

Our memories are deep and permanent.

Your great humanitarianism, your love of the less privileged,
your determination, your sacrifices, and your strong action
to eliminate injustice;

Your skilled and penetrating words
to persuade us all toward the love of our fellow man.

Your songs and descriptions make you our companion
until we too float on the listless air.

The intangible kiss I treasure, and mine is yours.(6)

And so we should all pray, "*Que su alma, y las almas de todos los difuntos por la misericordia de Diós descansen en paz.*" Amen.

¡Mil Gracias! ¡Y que Diós los bendiga!

Footnotes:

1. Ernesto Galarza, Kodachromes In Ryme, University of Notre Dame Press, 1982, p 10-11
2. Ernesto Galarza, "Institutional Deviancy: The Mexican-American Experience," Paper presented to mental health workers, (undated), p 11
3. Ernesto Galarza, "Hispanic Americans: Reclaiming A Heritage," Paper presented at the 74th Annual Convention, National Catholic Education Association, 4-23-77, p 6
4. Ibid, p 6
5. Ernesto Galarza, Kodachromes In Ryme, p 49
6. Copy of Mae Galarza's poem in response to Ernesto's "Obituary"