

## Making “Dreams of Education” Come True for Local High School Students



photo courtesy of Kisty Harris

For Luis Lara, attending college “is a dream come true.” Growing up in the border town of Mexicali, Lara vowed he would not succumb to the drug and violence conflicted lifestyle that defined his neighborhood. He turned instead to education.

“When I was younger, I had the opportunity to meet a student from the local Universidad Autonoma de Baja California,” Lara says. Taking Lara under his wing, the student brought Lara into university classrooms to experience first hand what it was like to go to college and develop his own dreams of someday obtaining a degree. “I became fascinated with the study of economics,” he says, noting it’s relevancy to everyday life issues.

When he was sixteen, Lara’s family migrated to the United States so he could continue pursuing his educational goals. Arriving in Anaheim to begin high school, Lara was faced with yet another challenge. “I didn’t speak a word of English,” he says. “It was frustrating because I was placed in very basic courses. I knew the material, but I didn’t know the language.”

With continual guidance and assistance from his mentor and others, Lara overcame this obstacle and eventually found himself completing advanced placement courses and applying to college.

Now a third-year honors economics major at UC Irvine, Lara seeks to serve as a mentor to others and instill the same dreams of education among socio-economic disadvantaged children in Santa Ana community schools. A recipient of the 2007 Donald A. Strauss Public Service Scholarship, Lara has founded “Dreams of Education,” a program that provides mentoring services, academic assistance and college admissions information to students and their parents at local high schools in the Santa Ana community. His goal: to help students – much like himself – realize their higher education potential through consistent interaction and guidance from university mentors.

“There are a number of barriers to entry into college,” Lara says. “For many students, the biggest barrier is not believing in themselves that they can get somewhere.” Lara, who knows a thing or two about overcoming obstacles, hopes to help students

overcome these and other hurdles in their paths so they may pursue their educational goals.

Utilizing student volunteers from UC Irvine, Santa Ana College – where Lara attended community college – and California State University, Fullerton, his “Dreams of Education” program will be established at Saddleback and Santa Ana high schools in fall 2007. “Our goal is to get a working model that we can then implement in local elementary and middle schools,” Lara says, emphasizing the importance of establishing educational aspirations early in life as a means to combat increasingly high dropout rates among adolescent teens. He will also work with the City of Santa Ana, Latino Health Access, Libreria Martinez and other community organizations to help students in the Santa Ana area succeed academically.

“Luis’ ‘Dreams of Education’ has all the key ingredients to inspire our students; successful role models with whom students can relate as well as the commitment of the Santa Ana Unified School District, Santa Ana College, UC Irvine and the entire community of Santa Ana,” says Jane A. Russo, superintendent, SAUSD. “We look forward to working with Luis in supporting our students.”

*“Dreams of Education” provides me an opportunity to inspire young people to pursue the path of higher education.*

*-Luis Lara*

In addition to his work with “Dreams of Education,” Lara is a member of the UC Irvine campus wide honors program, a recipient of the Orange County Hispanic Education Endowment Fund Scholarship, and the Engaging Latino Communities for Education Scholarship. He is a mentor with the Santa Ana Transfer Mentorship program, and founder and current president of “The Little School Program,” a community organization designed to assist immigrant men and women in the Anaheim community with English language development skills.

