

Between the Barrio and Seminar Room Alvaro Huerta, Doctoral Student

“Hot and terrible” is how Alvaro Huerta recalls those summer weekends, as a teen, soliciting work with his father on Los Angeles County’s westernmost edge. Huerta’s parents hoped to impress on a slightly built and “lazy” 13 year-old what it’s like to do hard physical labor for a living. Conceivably, they thought, it might nudge him toward choices that they themselves, as immigrants from Michoacán, Mexico to East L.A. via Tijuana, had not had.

Their home-grown “Take Your Child to Work Day” worked: Huerta calls those sweaty weed-pulling, hole-digging, and lawn-tending sessions his “first push” into an academic world that no one in his family before him, or any of his scores of cousins, had ever entered. Fear of hard physical labor may have propelled Huerta out of the barrio. Yet he has never really left his roots behind.

“An L.A. sensibility with scholar-activist thoughts” is how fellow Ph.D. student Ricardo Huerta (no relation) has described him. “When he came to lecture in our class, it was like a George Lopez comedy act crossed with a César Chávez motivational speech.”

By Alvaro’s telling, luck as much as talent landed him at UCLA in 1985. “I want to break the American myth that if you

work hard, you’ll automatically succeed,” he’s quick to say. “What does that idea say about my cousins” who never made it to college, he asks, or “my mother who worked hard for 40 years as a domestic worker and was never able to afford to buy her own home?”

After earning his B.A. in history, Huerta devoted nearly two decades to community-organizing campaigns — supporting immigrants who faced deportation, indigenous people in Chiapas, an impoverished Latino neighborhood fighting the proposed construction of a 550-megawatt power plant in its midst, and Mexican immigrants who do the bulk of the paid landscape gardening and yard maintenance in L.A..

He got involved with the latter in the mid 1990s, when gardeners faced a proposed citywide ban with stiff penalties — misdemeanor charges, up to six months in jail, and a \$1,000 fine — on the use of leaf blowers.

Initially “I didn’t know what a leaf blower was,” Huerta recalls. “We didn’t have gardeners in the projects.” To help these workers articulate their concerns, Huerta, along with fellow Chicano/a activists (including his wife, Antonia), co-founded the Association of Latin American Gardeners of Los Angeles, the first organization of Latino gardeners in the U.S.



The South Gate neighborhood’s campaign to block a proposed power plant was featured in the L.A. Times’ Jan. 10, 2001 edition. The coverage “gave our campaign a lot of momentum to win,” says Alvaro Huerta (bottom left), who led the collective and ultimately successful effort to halt the project.



Graduate student Alvaro Huerta in the East L.A. neighborhood where he grew up. The mural is titled “Ghosts of the Barrio.”

After many years of community work, Huerta returned to UCLA to earn an M.A. in urban planning. Now a doctoral student in City and Regional Planning at Berkeley with both academic and activist accomplishments crowding his CV, Huerta received the first-ever Thomas I. Yamashita Prize. Named for a UC Berkeley undergrad whose studies were cut short when he was sent to a WWII internment camp for Japanese Americans, the \$2,500 award will be given annually to a scholar activist by the Institute for the Study of Social Change. The prize honors individuals who are “engaged in social change, not just studying it,” said Yamashita’s son Robert, a Cal State San Marcos teacher and UC Berkeley graduate.

Professor Judith Innes — Huerta’s dissertation adviser and his current intellectual influence — pictures him, one day, as “a leading academic” in the city-planning field. Under her direction, he’s doing doctoral research on how Mexican immigrant gardeners use social networks to survive and sometimes thrive.

A self-taught writer, he also seeks to illuminate the Latino experience by penning short stories based on his childhood. Huerta says he writes fiction with his 8-year-old son, Joaquin, in mind — so that should he ever aspire to be a writer, “it wouldn’t feel far fetched.”

“My wife originally encouraged me to pursue an academic career and write short stories. Many things we do are for Joaquin — so he can see that there are options, ones that we didn’t have growing up.”

— Cathy Cockrell, UC Berkeley NewsCenter



Alvaro Huerta accepts the Thomas I. Yamashita Prize, accompanied by his wife, Antonia Montes, and son, Joaquin.