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## When the Diploma Is Just a Dream



Oscar Hidalgo/The New York Times

Jaime Carrera came to America to build a new life. High school wasn't part of it.

By EMILY BRADY  
Published: June 24, 2007

**WHEN** he lets his mind drift, Jaime Carrera dreams not of his future but his past.

In a perfect world, Jaime, who is 18, would be graduating from high

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school this month, along with 41,000 seniors from around the city, and maybe anticipating one last carefree summer before heading off to college.



Instead, he will be spending months or maybe years in a ramshackle workshop in the West Farms section of the Bronx. There, six days a week, along with two of his uncles, Jaime sands, solders and paints metal doors and gates for \$360 a week.

Jaime, who lives with his elder brother in Parkchester, and whose baby-faced looks and bashful demeanor belie his grown-up job, is not a high school dropout — simply because he never dropped in. He came to New York alone three years ago from Tehuacán, his valley home in the Mexican state of Puebla, where his mother and three other siblings still live, but education was not on his mind. “I came here to work,” he said.

Jaime is one of the city’s undocumented teenagers, most of them males like himself, who, in the words of Robert Courtney Smith, a sociologist at [Baruch College](#) who studies Mexican immigrants in the city, are “caught between two dreams — the dream of second-generation upward mobility, and of making money now and being able to live a little better.” Many of these teenagers, who often immigrate alone and speak little English, are scrubbing dishes in restaurant kitchens and hammering away at construction sites well before reaching 18, the standard age for high school graduation.

It is virtually impossible to track the numbers of this group, but Richard Fry, a demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center, estimates that of the one million foreign-born Americans 15 to 17 who were counted in 2005 by the [Census Bureau](#), about 60,000 interrupted their schooling abroad before migrating and probably never resumed their studies in the United States. Of this group, Mr. Fry said, 69 percent were, like Jaime, from Mexico.

On Sundays, his day off, Jaime plays baseball with friends and his uncles at a field in Bedford Park that is big enough to accommodate four games at once. Dominicans play at one end, Mexicans at the other, and women with small children cluster around both groups.

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Stories like Jaime's often bubble up among the players and the crowd. Enrique, a 22-year-old who would not give his last name because of his shaky [immigration](#) status, said he started working in construction when he came to live in New York with his three brothers seven years ago. "I didn't enroll in school then because I didn't know how," he explained. "And I had a lot of expenses."

Six months into his new job, Enrique fell three stories at a work site, shattering his wrists. He still works in construction, but his wrists ache at the end of the day and he still thinks about school.

"I want to know something else," Enrique said. "A doctor, or maybe a veterinarian."

Jaime, who spent his first year in New York washing dishes before going to work with his uncles, has less lofty but nonetheless ambitious goals. He would like to learn English and to program and repair electronic systems in cars.

"It's an immigrant community that has a lot of ganas — a lot of desire to move ahead," Professor Smith said of Mexicans in New York. The trouble, he added, is that the economic, social and community support needed to get ahead has not kept pace with that desire.

In the opinion of Claire Sylvan, executive director of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, which works with the city's Department of Education to oversee eight schools serving recent immigrants, the challenge is to customize schools by offering night courses and other flexible approaches that will meet these teenagers' needs.

"They've been driven here for economic reasons," Dr. Sylvan said. "It's a hard group to keep in school without giving them the support they'd need."

Angelo Cabrera, now 32, was once one of these teenagers. Like Jaime, he came to New York from Puebla when he was 15, and then he worked in the Bronx for three years, in the basement of a supermarket.

In retrospect, he is thankful that he held that job, Mr. Cabrera said, because it drove him

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into school. After earning a G.E.D., he earned a bachelor's degree in political science from Baruch College and founded the Mexican-American Students Alliance, a nonprofit group that helps Mexican-Americans get an education.

"If I tell them anything," Mr. Cabrera said, "it's that education is the best investment they can make, for themselves and their families. It's the opportunity to reach the American dream."

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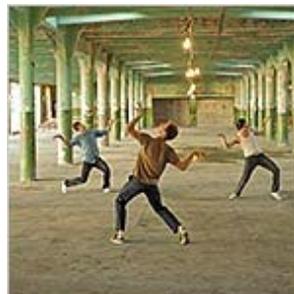
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June 24, 2007

# The Mexican Will See You Now

By [MIREYA NAVARRO](#)

Correction Appended

SANTA ANA, Calif.

IT started out as a joke.

A few years ago, Will Swaim, then the editor of The OC Weekly, had noticed a billboard showing a wildly popular Los Angeles radio morning show D.J., Eduardo Sotelo (known as Piolin or Tweety Bird), posing cross-eyed under a Viking hat.

He had no idea what it meant.

“Why not ask readers to send in questions about Mexicans?” he asked Gustavo Arellano, his food editor and investigative reporter. Mr. Arellano, a Mexican-American and the only Latino on staff of the alternative newspaper in Orange County, complied by making up the first question: “Dear Mexican: Why do Mexicans call white people gringos?” — and answering in jest that “only gringos call gringos gringos.” (He said Mexicans preferred the derogatory term “gabachos.”)

So began a new Q. and A. column, “¡Ask a Mexican!” which made its debut in November 2004 and unleashed a torrent of criticism and attention, not to mention questions. Among them: What’s with the Mexican need to display the Virgin of Guadalupe everywhere? (“We can display our saints as comfortably in a cathedral as we do on hubcaps,” came part of the answer.) Less than three years later, the column appears in two dozen alternative newsweeklies (and it will run in The Village Voice starting this week), and has been compiled in a book of the same name published in May by Scribner.

In the process, “¡Ask a Mexican!” has turned its 28-year-old author into both a pundit, sought after by national news media to comment on all things Mexican, and a pariah. Many of his Mexican readers complain in letters to the editor, and now to bookstores, that he reinforces stereotypes, mischaracterizes aspects of the culture and promotes hate under the guise of humor.

Regardless of how Mr. Arellano is viewed, his column has served to open a window on how society sees its largest immigrant population. It seems especially relevant now, with the president’s immigration reform bill having been derailed in part by constituents outraged over an amnesty provision.

“I have no problem with immigrants,” one questioner of Dutch and Irish descent wrote recently to “¡Ask a Mexican!” “What I can’t stand are a bunch of fence-hopping, river-wading illegals telling me I owe them a free education, free health care and free transportation and then making me speak Spanish at every restaurant, car wash and public school.”

The questions pour in at the rate of 50 a week, revealing confusion, curiosity, anger and xenophobia. “Part of the joke

is the assumption that the reader doesn't know any Mexicans," said Ted Kissell, editor of The OC Weekly. Mr. Arellano, he noted, "is a surrogate Mexican for our English-speaking readership."

Mr. Arellano, born in Anaheim to Mexican immigrants, one of them a father who crossed the border illegally several times starting in the 1960s, doesn't deny that his satire is not for everyone. "I use the column to give the straight dope but also be as rude as possible to people who deserve it," he explained. Accordingly, his responses often cite studies and statistics in a flurry of profanity. And he tackles some questions with the gusto of someone who not only wants to set the record straight but also wants to settle scores.

"Gracias for illustrating the great double standard in America's immigration policy," Mr. Arellano wrote in response to a reader who suggested that Mexicans stay in Mexico to improve their own country. "Centuries of immigrant waves chose not to improve their homelands and to try their luck in a new land, and we rightfully celebrate their pluck as pioneers. Yet when Mexicans follow in the footsteps of our gabacho forefathers, we accuse them of lacking self-motivation and want to shut down the border."

Then, in typical fashion, he used an epithet to refer to the reader and challenged him to give up his cheap labor and "taco-and-enchilada combos."

ON a recent afternoon at his cubicle, Mr. Arellano scrolled through a 170-page long backlog of questions. He said questions related to culture are the most common, showing his readership's appetite for understanding everything from Mexicans' fascination with telenovelas to the lyrics of "La Bamba." They are all real questions, Mr. Arellano says, even if he grants anonymity to encourage candidness. Most queries come via e-mail, to [themexican@askamexican.net](mailto:themexican@askamexican.net), and many come from Mexicans and other Latinos mystified by aspects of their culture. Mr. Arellano, who holds a master's degree in Latin American studies from the [University of California](#), Los Angeles, consults experts, libraries and databanks to lob back the grenades. But he argues that his qualifications also come from growing up in Orange County, which is one third Latino and the birthplace of the Minuteman Project, an anti-illegal immigration group, and Proposition 187, the 1990s voter-approved initiative denying public services to illegal immigrants.

"My father was an illegal immigrant," he said. "My mom was a tomato canner. They live their lives in Spanish. My parents are the immigrants that conservatives hate."

But his father later became a citizen and now favors immigration controls, a transformation Mr. Arellano uses to argue that his family, including three siblings, is proof that Mexicans assimilate like any other previous wave of immigrants.

Mr. Arellano, who describes his own Spanish as "atrocious," began writing for The OC Weekly while in college and landed a full-time job there in 2003. In addition to the "¡Ask a Mexican!" column, he writes for the opinion pages of The Los Angeles Times as a contributing editor and answers questions once a month on several local radio shows.

While comfortable in the role of pundit — he's answered questions on national television like "If anybody should be mad, shouldn't it be the U.S. toward Mexico?" (Sean Hannity of Fox News) and "Why should I have to press 1 to get English?" ([Stephen Colbert](#), "The Colbert Report") — he quickly sets straight those who take him for a comedian.

"A movie director told me, 'You can be the next Cantinflas,'" he said, referring to Mario Moreno, a revered Mexican comic actor who died in 1993. "I just said 'No, no, you're missing the point. This is satire. Outrageousness mixed in with jarring truth.' "

Indeed, Mr. Arellano manages both to amuse and outrage. He sometimes adopts the sexist, homophobic and racist

language of some of his readers and is as likely to mock gays as Guatemalans and Chicano-studies programs.

The logo for the column — a smiling mustachioed man with a gold tooth and a sombrero — has brought many complaints, to which Mr. Arellano has jokingly answered that his father looks like that.

Mr. Arellano, who says ultimately his purpose is to debunk myths and misconceptions, said that he is trying to rob stereotypical images and slurs of their power by appropriating them. But Mr. Kissell says letters to the editor run 50-50 for and against the column.

“I don’t see the humor in the way he describes our culture,” said Amin David, president of Los Amigos of Orange County, a civil rights group. “He’s feeding the prurient interest of people who are against Mexicans.”

But admirers appreciate his honesty and some say that Mr. Arellano’s attitude is a function of his youth and education.

“In a way I can say I’m proud that we have someone who has the guts to go out there and tell it like it is,” said Rueben Martínez, owner of Librería Martínez Books and Art Gallery in Santa Ana, where Mr. Arellano drew a throng of 500 people at a book-signing last month (and where employees fielded calls from a few customers urging the bookstore to drop the book.)

Anthea Raymond, president of the Los Angeles Press Club, which last week gave Mr. Arellano its President’s Award for his cultural commentary, said the different reactions to Mr. Arellano’s style may be generational, in the same way the civil rights and hip-hop generations diverge among African-Americans. But she said his humor helps bridge the cultural divide “at a time we really need that.”

Though Mr. Arellano’s job description may be professional Mexican, his ambition is decidedly American: he dreams of being the host of a one-hour radio show about “The Simpsons,” which he cites as a major influence in teaching him how “to be hilarious and offer substance at the same time.” For now, he has another book due for Scribner that is part memoir, part history of Orange County.

With his advance in “the mid-six figures” for the two-book deal, he bought a 1974 Cadillac Eldorado convertible. But always instructive, he noted that doing so was not necessarily a Mexican thing.

“The Mexican thing would be to buy a humongous truck,” he said. “That would be Mexican.”

Correction: July 1, 2007

An article last week about Gustavo Arellano, the journalist who started the newspaper column “¡Ask a Mexican!” that became a book of the same name, misstated the e-mail address for readers to write to him. It is [themexican@askamexican.net](mailto:themexican@askamexican.net).

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