

# Aspirations to ‘Walk In Peace’

*Barrios Unidos founder set to speak at 12th annual César Chávez Convocation*

- by [Cindy Ho](#)
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Daniel "Nane" Alejandrez spoke about how his identity as an activist was formed by his time as a student at UC Santa Cruz at the "Deconstructing Ferguson" panel on Feb. 24. Alejandrez is the founder of Barrios Unidos, a violence prevention organization. Photo by Stephen De Ropp.

Piled on Nane's desk are stacks of envelopes from people who are imprisoned around the nation, waiting for a response.

"Not one letter will tell you everything is good in prison. They all want to get out and are all trying to see what they can do to educate themselves. What can they do to change this and involve themselves as peacemakers? Everyone gets written back to."

UC Santa Cruz alumnus and community studies major Daniel "Nane" Alejandrez is the founder and executive director of Barrios Unidos, a Santa Cruz-based organization that works nationwide to prevent youth violence and provide alternatives for individuals who

are, or have been, incarcerated. Alejandrez and his wife Jenny Alejandrez created Barrios Unidos, then known as El Teatro de La Tierra Morena (Theatre of the Brown Earth), at “married-student apartments,” or Family Student Housing, in 1977.

The organization began out of his car — Alejandrez packed his trunk with posters and paint that he’d bring to local cities like Watsonville, Salinas and Gonzales to host violence prevention conferences. He recalls selling tacos, tortillas and T-shirts to help fund his goal of building a community center in Santa Cruz.

As a UCSC student, Alejandrez organized car shows at Quarry Plaza as a fundraiser for Barrios Unidos to increase cultural awareness on campus. The first car show brought in 1,500 low-riders and included car hopping contests.

Alejandrez said there was barely a Chican@\* student presence on campus and car shows “had a lot to do with bringing in culture from our community. It’s a way of life.”

His vision of nonviolence was sparked by César Chávez when he heard him speak on the radio in the cotton fields. When Alejandrez was drafted at 18 to fight in the Vietnam War, he couldn’t understand why he was there.

“I found myself as a young kid in this war. It did a lot to me. I met some beautiful people who I’m supposed to hate. Trying to undo all that,” Alejandrez paused. “I never agreed. It took me more than 15 years to realize something had happened to me.”

Alejandrez was battling heroin addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder, and he knew he needed to make a change within himself if he was going to continue advocating change for others.

“It’s made an amazing transformation for myself to be able to do this work, to be able to go into the prisons and talk to my Hmong friends, Vietnamese friends, the few Japanese friends, Chinese friends and everyone else who is now the new prisoner in this country,” Alejandrez said.

Nane Alejandrez is this year’s keynote speaker at the 12th annual César Chávez Convocation on May 12.

Nane means “walk in peace,” and Alejandrez would often ask himself, “Why did my grandmother name me Nane? What did she have envisioned for me?”

The convocation is created through a collaborative effort between the College Ten Co-Curricular Programs Office and the Chican@/Latin@ Resource Center (El Centro). The organizers knew it was time to “honor” his continuous activism within prisons and the community.

“It’s been 12 years and we haven’t paid our dues to Alejandrez,” said third-year Elisa Aquino, a co-leader of this year’s convocation. “He does a lot of work around both black and brown communities, which we thought was relevant to issues that are going on today. He really embodies César Chávez’s legacy.”

Barrios Unidos operates the César E. Chávez School for Social Change, an alternative high school in Santa Cruz dedicated to empowering at-risk youth to become positive, successful adults.

Walking through the doors of Barrios Unidos, visitors are met with a large painting on the wall of César Chávez with grapes in the background, symbolizing the Delano Grape Strike he helped lead.

The strike against growers of table grapes in California for low wages and working conditions was a significant victory for the United Farm Workers. Alejandrez also has several posters of Chávez in his office. He explained how his reverence for Chávez began due to Alejandrez's upbringing in a farm worker family.

"César has been an inspiration since my teenage years," Alejandrez said. "I first heard César speak on the radio when I was working in the fields in the '60s. I try to live my life to his principles. He helped me believe in myself — Sí, se puede."

Alejandrez has devoted his life to not only educating people on nonviolence, but preventing violence in the streets, something he calls the "madness that destroys our youth." Barrios Unidos runs different youth violence prevention programs each focused on kids, youth groups and high schoolers.

Another program housed under Barrios Unidos is The Prison Project, which is dedicated to providing cultural and spiritual education, support and hope for individuals who are incarcerated or were incarcerated. Barrios Unidos has made connections with people from the Santa Cruz County Jail, Santa Cruz Juvenile Hall, San Quentin State Prison and Deuel Vocational Institution, to name a few.

The Prison Project helps reconnect people who are incarcerated with society through correspondence, educational programming and events inside prisons. Alejandrez said getting people in touch with their culture is a critical aspect that's often forgotten in prisons.

"The Prison Project is really based on the belief in positive human potential even in the most negative of settings," said retired sociology professor John Childs.

Childs has worked with The Prison Project for the past 10 years teaching classes organized by Barrios Unidos.

"[People] sit in the same room and work together with no problem," Childs said. "It's a positive shift in the paradigm of the prison system. Instead of being separated, people are working together and respecting each other's own distinct histories."

The Prison Project held a Cinco de Mayo event at the Deuel Vocational Institution. Out on the yard, there were about 2,000 men and the Xochut Aztec dance group invited everyone to come together in a circle for a "friendship dance." When the drumbeat started in the yard, people began to dance and laugh in unison.

Childs recalled a moment in the circle he'd never forget — a cameraman was going around, and a young white male with a shaved head and tattoos turned to Childs and asked, “Do I look okay? How's my hair looking?”

Childs laughed. “I said, ‘You look fine, brother.’ That moment might not seem like much, but it had a big impact on me. It amazed the prison administration. It amazed the men there and it amazed us.”

Barrios Unidos also hosts speakers who have been paroled to talk to individuals who are, or have been, incarcerated to remind them they can have a positive impact on society. Founder Nane Alejandrez often speaks to people who are incarcerated as well.

“I can see that when [Alejandrez] goes in there, it's hard to get people to give you any respect, but I watched him talk to these people and have them crying about their life experiences,” said retired community studies lecturer and former Santa Cruz Mayor Mike Rotkin.

Rotkin met Alejandrez during his time at UCSC. Alejandrez didn't have much, but he always had the drive to reform youth violence, Rotkin said.

Out of all the students Rotkin has taught, he said no one has made more of an impact on the community than Alejandrez.

“My motivation [to continue the work I do] comes every day by people I meet,” Alejandrez said. “I get motivated by the activism of young people. I get motivated because I don't want to see the rest of my grandchildren go to prison, so I have to work. I want to motivate other people to get involved to know who we are.”

*\*Latin@ and Chican@ is used to be inclusive of both males and females, as well as those who do not identify with the gender binary.*