

No Limits

Frank Guajardo inspires students in a poor Texas community to shoot for the Ivy League

Three years ago José Cruz faced a tough decision. Should he go to Columbia? Or to Yale? It was the kind of choice often reserved for wealthy students at private schools. But Cruz is from Elsa, Texas, one of the poorest communities in America. And remarkably, he wasn't alone. Other classmates were considering equally heady alternatives. Indeed, in the last dozen years, 51 graduates of Edcouch-Elsa High School have wound up at the nation's top universities. Their secret? A teacher named Frank Guajardo. "I thank him," says Cruz, 19, now a sophomore at Yale, "for the doors he opened for me."



"I've always gotten that extra push from him," says José Cruz (left, at home on spring break from Yale) of Guajardo (right).

Guajardo has been opening doors since September 1991, when he first challenged his honors English students to apply to the Ivy League. "Some of them looked at me as if I was crazy," he recalls. Few kids at Edcouch-Elsa had traveled beyond the twin towns for which the school is named, and many, children of Mexican migrant workers, lived in shacks with no electricity or running water. They perked up, though, when Guajardo pledged to show them the campuses himself. The next spring, after raising \$12,000 selling cakes and tacos, nine students joined him in two borrowed vans on a tour of top East Coast schools. That fall five entered the Ivy League.

Today the March college tour is an annual event, and 65 percent of seniors go on to higher education—double the rate of a decade ago and extraordinary in this area 15 miles from Mexico where three-quarters of the households earn less than \$10,000. "To see a whole community change its way of thinking," says Guajardo, 38, "from expecting mediocrity to expecting people to go places, that's a priceless reward."

Guajardo insists that he is not alone in helping to turn things around. In 1997 he and four others—including his wife, teacher Yvonne, 38—created the



Guajardo (right) and the kids got a look at Columbia on the first college tour, in '92.

school's year-round Llano Grande ("great plains") Center for Research and Development, where students collect oral histories, run a radio station, make documentary films and even work to improve the water supply. Such extracurricular activities help foster a sense of heritage, beef up college applications and boost confidence—crucial for kids thousands of miles from home coping with culture shock. "People bring up certain authors or classical music, and I don't always understand," says Jason Rodriguez, 20, a Brown sophomore majoring in computer science. "It does make me feel kind of

dumb and weird, but the feeling doesn't last." Instead, Rodriguez strives to enlighten non-Latino friends about his background. "They're intrigued," he notes, "with some of the simple stuff I take for granted, like breakfast tacos."

Funding for the \$500,000-a-year center—and for some student scholarships—comes from grants. Guajardo has the students do the grant applications and manage the money themselves, good experience for college and beyond. "Our kids' résumés are very, very substantive," he says.

Guajardo found his calling at an early age, sitting in the lap of his father, José, a Mexican field hand who left school after fourth grade and moved to Elsa with his wife, homemaker Julia, and their four sons when Frank was 6. José would read the story of a peasant boy named Pablito who went to the city to continue his education. "Pablito came back home to help develop his village," says Guajardo, "and that's what I did." After completing his master's in history at University of Texas, Austin, and studying abroad at Oxford's Brasenose College, Guajardo joined EEHS. He soon concluded that his students' greatest need was "exposure, to break the isolation, both geographic and mental."

His former students agree. Israel Rocha, Class of '96, went all the way to Washington, D.C., where he's press secretary for U.S. Rep. Ruben Hinojosa. The tour, says Rocha, 25, who earned a political science degree from Columbia, "made us realize that these schools were attainable." For some, the journey ultimately led them home. Ernesto Ayala, 25, majored in economics and international relations at Brown, washing dishes 20 hours a week to help pay his way. After snagging his B.A. in 2001, he returned to EEHS to teach. "I could be working at a corporation, making much more money," he says, "but something would be missing. The power a teacher has is incredible."

- Susan Horsburgh
- Anne Lang in Elsa



"My identity was shaped by living in this community," says Guajardo (at home in Edinburg, Texas, with sons Mac, 9, and Daniel, 13, wife Yvonne and daughter Andrea, 12).

INVERSIÓN EN EL FUTURO

Fiel creyente en la educación como vía de superación, Frank Guajardo orienta y exhorta a alumnos de escasos recursos en Texas que se abren puertas en prestigiosas universidades

Un día de otoño en 1991, Frank Guajardo se paró frente a sus alumnos en la secundaria Edcouch-Elsa y les preguntó sobre sus planes universitarios. Algunos guardaron silencio. Otros dijeron que tal vez solicitarían en las escuelas locales. “¿Por qué no a algunas de las universidades élites de Estados Unidos?”, les preguntó al escéptico grupo, en su mayoría hijos de trabajadores agrícolas residentes de dos de los pueblos más empobrecidos de Texas. “¿Por qué no lo consideran?”

La consideración se convirtió en ac-

ción meses después cuando Guajardo, de 38 años, y su esposa, Yvonne, llevaron a nueve estudiantes en dos camionetas a ver escuelas como Harvard, Yale, Columbia y el Instituto Tecnológico de Massachusetts. “Con excepción de los chicos trabajadores agrícolas, ninguno había salido de Texas”, dice Guajardo, orgulloso de que cinco de ese grupo fueron becados en ésas y otras escuelas, marcando la pauta para otros que han estudiado en las más prestigiosas universidades del país.

De hecho, una década después de esa primera excursión, que se repite anualmente gracias a donaciones, 51 estudiantes de Edcouch y Elsa han sido aceptados en las mejores instituciones, 26 se han graduado y otros están en escuelas de

medicina y leyes. “Esta comunidad se ha convencido que la educación lleva al progreso”, dice Guajardo, uno de cuatro hijos de José, irrigador, y Julia, ama de casa.

La pasión que Guajardo siente por la educación se manifestó en su vida en dos títulos académicos y su deseo de regresar, con esposa y tres hijos, a Edcouch-Elsa para enseñar inglés en su antigua secundaria. Ahora, como asesor, Guajardo se topa hoy por hoy con ex alumnos que vuelven para ayudar a otros a realizar sus sueños a través del Centro de Investigaciones y Desarrollo Llano Grande establecido en el plantel. “Si iba a marcar una diferencia, quería que fuera aquí”, dice Delia Pérez, graduada de Yale y maestra de historia en Edcouch-Elsa. Añade su colega, Ernesto Ayala: “El poder que tiene un maestro es increíble”. ■

“Siempre quisimos que nuestros hijos tuvieran una educación”, dice Julia Guajardo de su hijo, Frank (de corbata con ex alumnos de la secundaria Edcouch-Elsa). Agregó él: “La mejor educación que tuvimos fue en casa”.



PEOPLE's 30th Anniversary issue



Tell me all about it." When you're the editor of PEOPLE, you hear those five words a lot. Whatever's making headlines—a sensational trial, a celebrity breakup, a White House scandal—friends and strangers expect me to know the skinny. Happily, I usually do, thanks to this magazine's correspondents, writers and editors, who are masters at covering news of every sort. For 30 years, we've been telling you all about it, getting beyond gossip to dig deep into the stories behind the most fascinating people in the news.

When PEOPLE was born back in 1974, our up-close-and-personal brand of journalism was new, even revolutionary. "We hope to come at everything fresh," founding editor Richard B. Stolley wrote in our inaugural issue. "To reassess the old familiar faces. To welcome the new and eager. To peer into the lives of the hitherto undiscovered." Some critics labeled us fluff, but we clicked with readers immediately. "You have not only entertained us, but inspired us, raised our awareness of national and

world issues, even made us mad at times," one reader wrote me recently. "I was hooked from the very first issue." That loyalty—from 36 million of you—still motivates us each week. It's also made PEOPLE an American institution.

The media has changed in our wake. In 1974 there were no national weeklies devoted to pop culture, no entertainment news shows, no such thing as a Barbara Walters special. The field is more crowded now, but we continue to thrive—perhaps because whether it's Britney or Baghdad on your mind, we always do our homework.

But that doesn't mean we've lost our sense of humor. There was the time we asked several readers to step out in the Versace dress J.Lo wore to the 2000 Grammys, or the ode associate editor Mike Neill recently penned in honor of *Lord of the Rings* star Viggo Mortensen ("Viggo's here—and what a hunk! With eyes to make a maiden drunk..."). Still, we're proudest of the stories of everyday heroes like Kathy Harrison, a foster mother to 100 children with special needs, or



Our first issue, 1974



Frank Guajardo, a Texas teacher who has helped the children of migrant workers gain admission to Ivy League colleges, or the valor of the 9/11 fire-fighters. We've never shied away from hard stuff: families in crisis, missing kids, the ravages of too many wars.

Looking over 30 years of photos as we created this issue, I was struck by the richness of that editorial stew—not to mention all the famous faces who've graced our pages: Jackie and John Jr., Julia and Audrey, Diana and Grace, and seven Presidents too. They've all been part of a great conversation, one we hope is going strong three decades hence. Don't know what we'll be talking about then. But we can't wait to tell you all about it.

Martha Nelson

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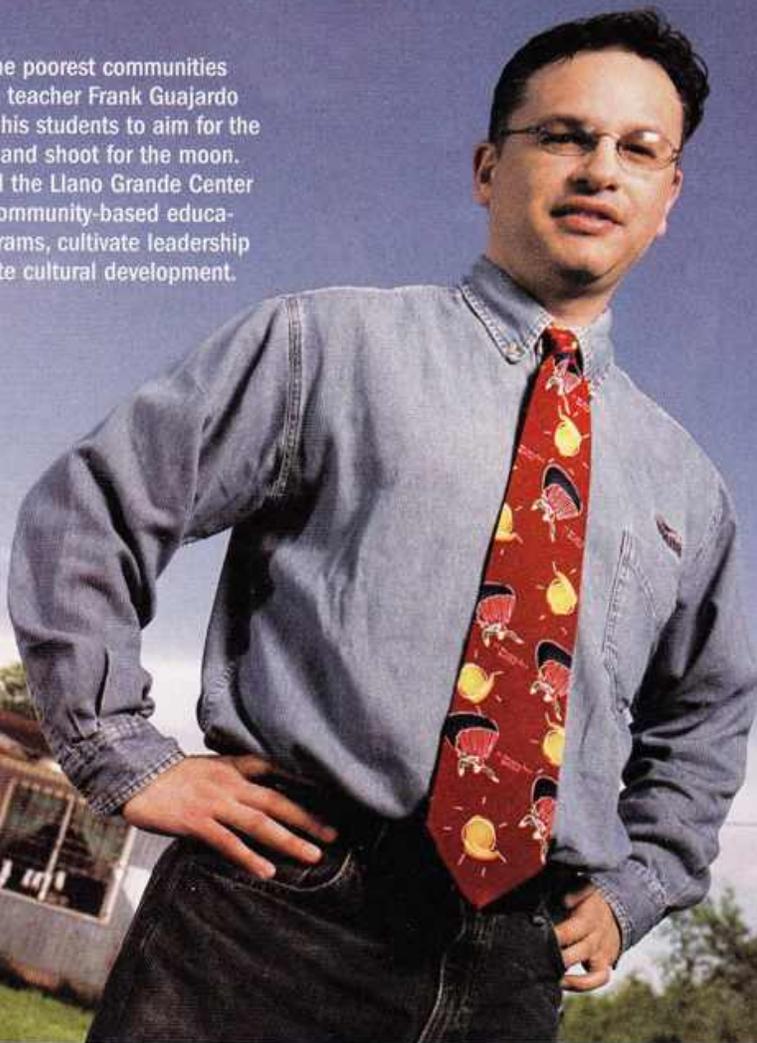
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PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE

Learning without Limits



In one of the poorest communities in America, teacher Frank Guajardo challenges his students to aim for the Ivy League and shoot for the moon. He founded the Llano Grande Center to create community-based educational programs, cultivate leadership and promote cultural development.



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