



Dissolving Borders & Transcending Adversity: How One Woman, Marisela Marquez, Makes It All Happen

By: Alexandra Gessesse

It is a beautiful, sunny Sunday afternoon, the perfect kind of weather to sit outside and be in the sun's warmth. As I park my car over by the Multi-Cultural Center, I am greeted by a welcoming smile and kind presence. Instead of chatting in her office, she invited me to chat outside, as she found comfort in the warm, fresh environment. We found ourselves seated on the picnic table outside the College of Creative Studies, sun beaming down onto her curls as she leans forward on the table, hands folded together as she's happy to be outdoors.

“I am so glad we're outside, the weather is just so inviting.”

I sat down with Marisela to learn more about a hidden figure that works day-in and day-out for students, as she helped me learn how to use my own voice back in 2016. During the spring quarter of my freshman year, I ran for the off-campus position on the Associated Student Senate; and despite the long days in the sun, and late nights in Isla Vista, Marisela was a beacon of support and guidance. She made it possible for me to learn how to utilize resources in Associated Students for the better good of the university, as they are always at our disposal; but also empower me to help others find their voice and passion too. Her friendly, inviting nature speaks

to the change she welcomes and makes in the world around her. Marisela Marquez is a woman who wears many hats on campus and in the community. She is a volunteer for KCSB, advisor to student organizations, a professor in Political Science and Chicano/a Studies, the Executive Director of Associated Students, and much more. What blew me away was how, despite these roles having completely different responsibilities (which are very time demanding) and having no relation to one another, Marisela has bridged people and resources in these spaces and communities across campus, and into the community. Coming from two worlds, Marisela has not only worked in different spheres, but has been raised in them. She continues to dissolve borders of education and activism and absorb the contrast to serve as lessons and tools of empowerment for others to see beyond these artificial dispositions of tribulations and division.

Marisela Marquez is a woman of color, a leader, visionary, and above all, a role model.

A WOMAN FROM TWO WORLDS



Photo from Voceros de UCSB

Marisela is a Mexican American woman who grew up with one foot in Laredo, Texas, and the other in Nova Laredo Tamaulipas, Mexico. These two cities, separated by the Rio Grande River and an international border, were the two different worlds that divided her identity. On one side of the border, schools and neighborhoods exuded wealth and individualism, and on the other side, a community enriched in culture and life. One had what the other lacked, and vice versa.

“I went back and forth between multiple worlds. On the Mexican side, we owned property and lived a family-oriented life. On the stateside, we were impoverished.”

— Marisela Marquez

She taught herself how to live in balance between the two sides, as she oftentimes found herself existing within her strong suit – teaching. This natural ability to teach, she states, was strengthened as a Spanish and English translator for her parents, and larger translating elsewhere. Marisela came from a family that valued education. Her family, like many immigrants, did not just want to “move to the United States” because they saw life there as any better than in Mexico; rather, they believed in the educational opportunities the U.S. had to offer, most particularly her mother. She believed that the United States could provide her children with a superior education that would open up many more doors and opportunities, more than what Mexico could provide. From sidewalks, sewage, street lights, and more, the U.S. side flourished in an infrastructure that was different from the Mexico side. The Mexico side, however, was enriched in a culture that embraced the outdoors, family, and culture. Yet, Marisela described the differences in lifestyles in Laredo, Texas and Nova Laredo Tamaulipas, Mexico helped her see independently of each other, the complexities that exist in each, and the severe disparity between the two. Her upbringing and experiences in a borderlands community were described as “country to country.” “My culture is elsewhere. That was on a daily basis, lived on one side, lived in one culture, and went to school on the other.”

While her mother saw a vision of education and a better life for Marisela and her children, it did not come easily, or as welcoming as one would think. She described how people who lived on the Texas side had developed infrastructure, like sidewalks, where they could ride their bikes, and not even think about *not* having sidewalks. It was the schism of the developed versus the undeveloped. When I asked Marisela what life was like in Laredo, Texas during her childhood, she vividly remembers the racialized experiences that followed.

“On a daily basis, on the United States side, I was called a wetback, which, which is a derogatory term on the border for people who go, who live across the river, because there is a river that separates Mexico from the United States down there. I didn’t know that I really understood what that meant because of my mother, and my family, we’re all about love. So, when people threw epithets, like calling me Mexican or wetback, they were trying to use it as a negative term.”

Nevertheless, Marisela met these harsh realities with love and perseverance. She embraced her culture, as it was her parents’ culture, despite it being used mostly as an insult in the United States, even up to this day. She was the best of two worlds, as she acknowledges it came from the different types of people her parents were. She embodied the creative, trailblazer nature of her mother, and at times harnessed the practical, risk-minimizing approaches her father engrained. Marisela believes that through education, particularly through her experiences in Chicano/a studies, she understood and embraced a heritage of resiliency and rich culture and saw how that might not always be appreciated or accepted in translation to the rest of the world. Through this wisdom and knowledge blended between life experiences and education, Marisela committed her life to dissolve these divisive boundaries and borders and substitute it with empowerment and self-awareness.

BRINGING POWER TO EMPOWERMENT



Graduate student Marisela Marquez pictured right, with former Vice Chancellor Michael D. Young. Photo taken from The UCSB Current.

“That’s why I work here [UCSB], because I could read all the dissertations in the library, go to all the conferences I wanted to go to, but the wisdom of any single undergraduate student of color, on a white campus, speaks to the real pain and real solutions that any scholar could ever imagine. And I just think that we don’t do it enough. It is a very deep insight.”

From her getting her B.A. in English and M.A. in Political Science at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio, Texas, to her Ph.D. in Political Science at UC Santa Barbara, Marisela found herself as a scholar and activist who received an unexpected enlightenment during her time as a graduate student at UCSB. Outside of the classroom, she was involved in conference development and management, having held the position as a lead organizer at a system-wide conference that had faculty involved in outreach efforts, the academic senate, SBCC Transfer program, and more. During her rigorous Ph.D. program, her mother became gravely ill, and on top of the long and studious nights, school did not come easy. When I asked her what kept her going, even into her current role as the Executive Director of Associated Students, she immediately responded with, “the students, the undergraduate students.” They gave her the energy she needed, and a new perspective on what it meant to be a scholar-tivist.

“I wouldn’t have finished political science given the unique variation the department can be from region to region, but I did because the students made their work and activism come to life. What they created and did, I was energized by. The strength really came from the undergraduates I

learned from. I didn't really have a choice. [Between] The dogmatic practices of the UC, and processes of how policies are created, undergraduates were going to put their lives on the line, and I admired their strength because of it, it went beyond what any scholar could write about."

FROM CLASSROOMS TO COMMUNITIES



Pictured are UCSB Alum & organizers, formerly advised by Marisela Marquez. Photo taken from Google Images.

Upon completing her dissertation, titled, “Political Tolerance in Higher Education: Identifying the Threshold of Support for Diversity Policies,” Marisela found a home to the rich legacy and history of student activism at UC Santa Barbara and Santa Barbara City College. Over the years, and into her career now as the Executive Director of Associated Students, Marisela has transcended ivory tower’s boundaries by finding a balance in academia, philanthropy, and activism. Many know Marisela by her title, the Executive Director of Associated Students, but only a few know the deep roots and work she does outside of her job. She has facilitated many talks and events hosted by the Multi-Cultural Center, (most recently one with Chicana scholar of cultural, queer, and feminist theory Gloria E. Anzaldua), to volunteering for KCSB-FM, a student-run, educational, non-commercial FM station broadcasting for the public interest. What I found most striking was that of the many hats she wears on campus, hardly few are actually a part of her core job responsibilities as Executive Director.

Although Marisela teaches for the Department of Chicano/a Studies and Political Science, her 100 percent appointment is to the role of Executive Director – meaning, any teaching she does in other departments is without payment, a voluntary donation. “I do that partially because I wouldn’t be working in a university if I wasn’t able to work in the classroom as well. And it makes, it makes it all come together, community work and academia.” Yet, in her role as Executive Director she is responsible for all fiscal management, staff personnel, and legal matters of student government organization with an annual budget of over \$13.5 million; advises and advocates on behalf of and support student government officers and appointees; supervises approximately 30 career staff members and approximately 300 part-time student staff members; oversees the enforcement of all Associated Students policies and procedures; and more. I would list it all, but I think the time commitment and physical presence the role of Executive Director demands speaks for itself. Nevertheless, Marisela is always there when a student, community member, administrator, or career staff needs her. “What motivates me is the ingenuity and creativity of students of college-age in particular. From the time that I have started, until now, which has been 12 years, that has never been a single quarter where I have not been challenged, and appropriately so, in terms of either my aid, my knowledge, or my understandings.”

With the internal knowledge of Associated Students, and largely the university, Marisela touched on how students from all walks of life, with ideas from all over the spectrum, come to her with ideas about establishing, creating, or bringing their ideas to life. They come to her because they know she has the knowledge and resources to help take their dreams off the ground and running, and as Marisela stated, “helping bring them to fruition.” She has utilized her research and academic background to investigate and develop academic programs and projects like “Not Enough Space Academic Preparation Project,” where she and Dr. Diane Fujino of the Asian American Studies Department used art and education as a medium for academic preparation for K-12 children at the La Casa de la Raza in the Santa Barbara area. When a community faces a crisis or dispute, Marisela is there to support students and mediate dialogue. She works across campus spaces that are often siloed from each other for the greater good of the student body. When I asked her what is one thing she hopes her work can teach students, she said: “Taking that [student ingenuity and creativity] from inside the UC, and taking it into the streets, no matter where or what it is, if it’s poetry or artists, just don’t stay within the UC, take it back to our communities.”



Photo of Marisela giving the Executive Director's report to the Student Senate. Photo taken from the Daily Nexus.