

Eric Arias: Lighting the Way for Community Activism

*"A charming, dependable demeanor paired with a classic Colgate smile—
Eric Arias fit the perfect image of a blossoming lawmaker."*

That was the first impression I had after meeting him for the first time at an info night in a prelaw student organization at UCSB. It was during the last quarter of his senior year and he stood diplomatically at the front of the lecture hall, delivering his personal experience with all the emanation of a rally speech. Perhaps that's why I wasn't surprised to find his campaign posters on my Facebook feed two years later.



Picture of Eric Arias on his campaign posters.

At the time, I couldn't believe that someone so young could run for office. Our limited interactions during his final quarter also left me skeptical but intrigued of the entire affair. But digging a little deeper, I discovered that Eric was far more impressive than his already loaded résumé; he a seasoned traveler, a cancer survivor, a part-time educator, and an advocate for his hometown since 2015.

Who is Eric now?

Within a year and a half after his graduation, Eric had distinguished himself as a young, reliable field representative in the city; advising youth leadership groups and meeting with city council

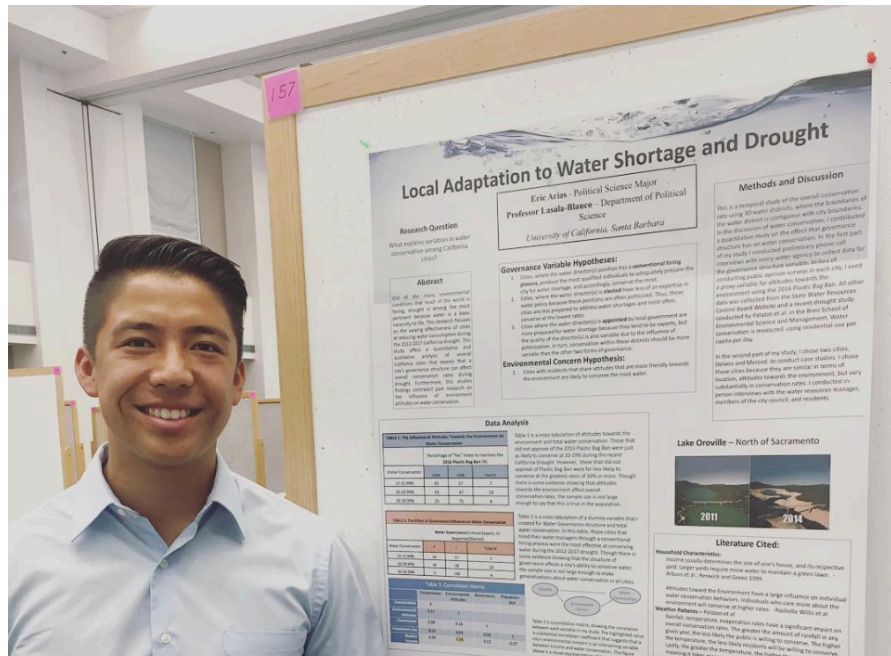
members while representing stakeholders. Our call was scheduled just one hour before his guest reading for a *Read for America* event at a neighboring city.

As the initial awkwardness melted away, Eric became more personable in our conversations. His dependable and charismatic demeanor slowly unfurled the pensive nature of a sensitive and grateful individual. I witnessed the endless appreciation he carried for his family and his community, especially during his battle with Burkitt's lymphoma. When news of his diagnosis spread around his city, droves of friends and strangers appeared at the shredded beef plate fundraiser for his treatment. Hundreds donated to his *Gofundme* page that his great aunt started. He knew then, that he wanted to give back to the community that supported him during the darkest moments of his life.

At his core, Eric represents many young adults today. He's ambitious, talented, and ready to give back to his community. Behind his work is a story of struggle and discovery that shaped Eric into a young man who's tackling many of the problems in his hometown today. He embodies a new generation of community-based activism that reinvigorates political participation and redefines politics to many uncertain voters in the US.

An Unlikely Beginning

Eric Arias was only ten years old when he found himself in a hospital, gasping for air, as his mother comforted him by his side. He has suffered an asthma attack while playing football on a particularly hot summer day in Bakersfield, California. While Eric was put on a breathing treatment, he remembered his mother brushing off how common asthma is in their family. As generational residents of the valley, Eric and many of his family understood upper-respiratory illnesses like asthma and "valley fever" as the norm in their community.



Eric presenting his senior thesis on water shortage in Southern California

Eric remember thinking, “Why is [his mom] not concerned? Why is this ordinary?”

Eric never stopped questioning why residents of the valley continued to suffer from poor air quality and other environmental issues. Over the years, he inadvertently became an advocate for the Central Valley. As a student at UCSB, he penned a sixty-seven-page thesis that discussed the discrepancy of water usage policies between the cities of Delano and Merced. He found that federal regulations inadequately measured the level of drought prevention efficacy between different cities. His thesis targeted why places in Kern County were being unfairly punished for not lowering their water usage when they had been enforcing water-saving measures for an extensive period of time. Kern County was meeting the state water-usage goals, but not under the same water-saving margins. Eric used his piece to highlight the often-misguided legislation that fail to recognize the unique circumstance of the Central Valley compared to other urban centers in California.

Treading the line between being an honor student and a part-time advocate, Eric offered his expertise to local communities wherever he went, including the offices of Senator Salud Cabajal in Santa Barbara and Supervisor Leticia Perez in Kern County. He worked alongside representatives through all four years at UCSB, contributing to local campaigns and connecting Congressional staff with their constituencies. Meanwhile, he never left behind his commitment to Kern County, operating a tutoring service called Kern Tutoring that extended from Santa Barbara to Agoura Hills.

“You learn to become a problem solver. Some would say you become a firefighter---literally putting out fires all the time. And so, I think I bring a lot of problem-solving skills in this capacity.”



Eric (center) with Assembly member Rudy Salas (left) campaigning at polls.

Post-graduation, he found himself investigating similar issues in the Central Valley—but this time, as a field representative for Assembly Member Rudy Salas in the 32nd Assembly District. As a recent UCSB graduate, he knew that his concerns for environmental degradation and air pollution would lead him back to his hometown in the Kern County, where [70 percent of California’s petroleum extraction originates](#). He had been in the sidelines for too long. It was time for him to step into leadership and find his voice in the legislative advocacy and policymaking work that he had already been doing. **This March, he will be the youngest member running for a seat in the Democratic Central Committee in Kern County for the Primary Election.**

On the ground

Eric was a fresh face in public office, and he had everything to prove with no time to spare.



Eric with Assembly member Rudy Salas and his team

A typical day required Eric to drive to several different cities, hold meetings with dozens of city officials and staff members, and advise several different youth leadership organizations in the local elementary and high schools. When I asked him to walk me through a day in his life, he had to check a detailed calendar app on his phone before listing a dizzying arrangement of meetings, fundraisers, conference calls, and school visits. Typically, he finds that himself busiest during the early months of Spring, sometimes returning home during the later hours of the evening.

This year is especially difficult for him and the members of his team, with the Primary Election dawning on the District representatives. Not only does Eric need to work on his own campaign,

he knew that he had to fight for the Assembly Members and District Supervisors that he supports in Kern County. Unlike the Bay area and Southern California, seats within his district are often heavily contested, often wavering between party lines in each consecutive election. This year, he will be running for one of five seats on the committee. While this position is a relatively small one in comparison to the rest of the race, it is also the most impacted in the district, with over thirteen candidates vying for a spot.

As a field representative, Eric's personal platform also needed to be different from the more saturated liberal ideologies in the state capital. His constituents are made up of lifelong workers and contractors of the petroleum and agriculture industry. In a relatively more conservative district, Eric tows the line between pushing aspirational sustainable energy bills and the concerns of unemployment and food growth. Eric mentions how the Central Valley is heavily underrepresented in the state, and he needs to draw attention to the very real apprehensions of industry-dependent cities.

“How do we address those concerns while also achieving renewable energy goals? We just need to continue to think thoughtfully about [sustainability] and make sure that [we] also continue to voice the concerns of residents here.”

Eric is definitely a different leader than he was when he began of his involvement with policymaking in the government. But his core goals never wavered. Eric assured me that the issues in Bakersfield and the Central Valley will always be near to his heart. Eventually, he hopes to pass bills that could transform the state, but that the moment, he finds his priorities in the sunny valley that he shared his childhood with.

(Update: Eric was officially elected as a member on the Democratic Central Committee as of March 13, 2020!)