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Students and community members united for a 14-day hunger strike in 1993 to demand a Chicana/o studies department from the university.

A hunger satisfied

PAST STRIKE PARTICIPANTS WELCOME UCLA'S NEW CHICANA/O DEPARTMENT

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Over a decade ago, Schoenberg quad was the stage for one of UCLA's most enduring displays of student activism – the student-initiated hunger strike of 1993.

Lining the quad with a procession of tents, five students, a professor, two community leaders and a high school student willingly put their lives in danger as they refused to eat until their demands of having a Chicana/o studies department were met.

Surviving on only water, determination and support from the community, students and administration came to an agreement after 14 days with the establishment of the César E. Chávez Center for Interdisciplinary Instruction in Chicana and Chicano Studies.

And just a few weeks ago, the initial demands of the hunger strikers were finally fulfilled as a Chicana/o Studies Department was approved alongside the César E. Chávez Center.

"Those who were involved will never forget it," said Steven Loza, an ethnomusicology professor who was one of the faculty negotiators at the time of the strike.

The hunger strikers, now involved in a multitude of career fields all share one feeling – a sense of comfort and long awaited accomplishment.

Balvina Collazo, one of the strikers who was a third-year student at the time of the protest, said this department was something that needed to be done for the community.

"We tried everything. This was our last resort – our life was on the line," Collazo said.

Now a mother of two residing in Northern California, Collazo said that one thing she will always remember was the support of the community throughout the two weeks – a community that consisted of not just Latinos but an array of different cultures.

Passing the time in the tents by reading, studying, and preparing for interviews and

meetings with the administration, Collazo said she and her fellow strikers were determined not to give up.

"We knew what we were getting into – there was no second thoughts," she said.

Surprised and excited when she heard news of the approval just last week, Collazo emphasized that her time in the tents, fighting for what she believed in, is an experience she will never forget.

"It's about time. I'm happy that it happened; it just should have been sooner," she said with a sigh of relief. "I guess we can make a difference even though it is after the fact. It was well worth it. Definitely getting the center alone was worth what we went through."

Though the department has been approved by Chancellor Albert Carnesale, discussion on whether the name César E. Chávez will be attached to the department is still underway.

"Chancellor Carnesale has stated that if, at some future date, the faculty of the department of Chicana/o studies should ask him to forward to the UC Office of the President and the Academic Council a recommendation to name the department, he would be pleased to do so," said Lawrence Lokman, university spokesman.

Until a final decision is made, the department of Chicana/o studies and the César E. Chávez Center for Interdisciplinary Instruction in Chicana and Chicano Studies will co-exist, said Reynaldo Macías, professor and chair of the center. Reasons for this are to "maintain a historical continuity with the hunger strike and the significance of honoring Chávez," he said.

"(This is) not naming a department. It's a unit keeping its name while converting from a center for interdisciplinary instruction to a department," Macías said. "From the beginning, for all intents and purposes, it was a department."

Currently, the faculty is in the process of putting in a contribution to a letter the chancellor offered to send to the UC Office of the President addressing the naming issue, Macías said.

"The chancellor is not in opposition to honoring Chávez in short of naming a department," he said.

Though over a decade has passed, those involved in the strike remember the events vividly, making the approval even more prominent and meaningful.

As a high school senior in 1993 contemplating whether to attend UCLA, Steve Veres said the hunger strike, for him, was a compelling enough reason to become a Bruin.

Visiting the tent site three or four days out of the strike's duration, Veres said he felt like he was in the middle of a civil rights movement.

"(There was a) raw energy – it was amazing. A powerful force of people who were determined (and) so persistent," said Veres, who is currently the district director for assemblywoman Cindy Montañez, D-San Fernando, another student striker at the time.

Witnessing the protests firsthand, when Veres learned of the new department, he said it was nothing short of "rewarding and comforting."

Other strikers, who sacrificed their health for a promising education, didn't stop their community activism at the college level, as they have left influential marks around the community.

Along with Montañez, Marcos Aguilar, a fourth-year student striker at the time of the protests, is responsible for the establishment of a school in East Los Angeles – Academia Semillas del Pueblo Charter School, which focuses on educating children of immigrant families through their own culture.

Those who were involved in the strike, whether they refused to eat or were present for support, all refer to the historical two weeks as "a valuable experience."

"This is something I will always think about for the rest of my life. Any injustice that happens even in my community, I will fight for it," Collazo said. "It taught me how to be a leader."

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