

Border Project Director To Speak At Opening Reception For César E. Chávez Celebration 2005 April 5

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Attorney Claudia Smith, described by the international human rights organization Global Exchange as "one of the foremost authorities on issues concerning the U.S.-Mexico border control policies and practices," will be the featured speaker at the opening reception for the César E. Chávez Celebration 2005 at the University of California San Diego.

Smith, the director of the Border Project, California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, will speak during reception festivities from noon to 1:30 p.m. April 5 in the International House Great Hall, Eleanor Roosevelt College. She also will be honored by the César E. Chávez Celebration Planning Committee with an award for her humanitarian efforts.

The Chicano/Latino Alumni Association will award scholarships to two UCSD students during the reception.

Smith first heard Chávez speak in 1970 about the 1965 grape boycott in California and decided then to come to California to work with farm workers. Realizing what they really needed were lawyers, she attended law school at the University of San Diego, received her JD in 1974 and began work with the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation and its offshoot, the Border Project.

Operation Gatekeeper, established in San Diego in 1994 as a way to deter illegal immigration, is of particular concern for Smith.

"I turned my attention to border enforcement issues," Smith says, "starting with conditions of detention and then concentrating on the ever deadlier strategy of pushing undocumented foot traffic out of the populated areas and, ultimately, into the desert.

"Along with the local ACLU chapters, we have challenged the strategy before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, arguing that it is an abuse of the right to control the border."

Smith argues that Operation Gatekeeper has not discouraged immigration so much as put people in harm's way.

Among Smith's other causes on border issues are pushing for identification by the Mexican government of roughly 1,000 unidentified migrant dead, and seeking a ban on the Border Patrol's use of hollow-point bullets which expand upon impact.

"On the occasion of International Women's Day," Smith says, "I reminded the Mexican government of its obligation to protect migrant women from violence, given that so many of them are being subjected to sexual assaults as they make their way to the border."

Smith has created a website to herald her cause, www.stopgatekeeper.org, which has extensive data on the border situation. The English home page sets the tone. "3,000 immigrants dead: Does anyone care?" It then lists names of these dead immigrants, and at the end says: "and approximately 1,000 unidentified migrants ..." The Spanish home page echoes this message.

Smith was born in Guatemala and came to the United States in 1966. After receiving a bachelor's degree from George Washington University, she planned to pursue a doctorate in Latin American Studies. It was then that she heard Chávez speak on the grape boycott and turned her attentions to the needs of migrants, farm workers, and the rural poor. In addition to the JD from USD, in January she completed requirements for a master's degree from USD in international law, focusing on human rights law.

This enables "me to write papers on border issues," Smith says, "the latest about the environmental effects on both sides of the border fences that are being erected, especially the triple fence here."

Smith was named a Petra Foundation Fellow in 2000 for her life-long struggle to protect and support the rights of migrants from Mexico and Central America. The Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit foundation recognizes individuals from across the country for their contributions to freedom, equality, and justice in their communities.

Jorge Mariscal, director of the UCSD Chicana/o-Latina/o Arts and Humanities Program, and Cecil Lytle, provost of Thurgood Marshall College, are co-chairing the César E. Chávez Celebration Planning Committee. Olivia Puentes Reynolds is the community representative. For more information on the Chávez celebration visit the web site at <http://blink.ucsd.edu/go/chavez>. For further information on Smith and the opening reception call (858) 534-6862.

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