

## Chicano Activist And Award-Winning Poet Baca To Speak April 20 At UCSD

March 29, 2004

Jan Jennings

Jimmy Santiago Baca is a Chicano poet and activist who believes that the oppression, racism, indifference, ignorance, and arrogance that Chicanos have "traditionally been treated with by the dominant society has been for [Chicanos] a sort of gift. It ensured our isolation and ensured that we can continue to hold on to our folklore and our customs and our rituals and our laughter and our way of doing things."

The award-winning poet and contemporary poetry critic will speak on *The Power of Dream* at 7 p.m. April 20 in Mandeville Recital Hall at the University of California, San Diego, as part of month-long activities celebrating the life and accomplishments of Chicano civil rights leader César E. Chávez. Baca's appearance is being sponsored by the UCSD César E. Chávez Celebration Committee and the Helen Edison Lecture Series.

Baca's life story runs from orphanage to prison to self-taught writer to a doctorate in literature to advocate for the importance and contributions of Chicanos - and the power of language.

"Language provides me with a journey I would not have otherwise had," says Baca, "a journey into myself and my people ... I have made all the mistakes that anybody could make in life and I have done all the things that you're not supposed to do... Language is the only thing that I can go to and drink from and feel invigorated and feel happy about living. It carries the magic of my people's heart."

For his poetry and prose, Baca's awards and honors include the Wallace Stevens Endowed Chair at Yale University, the National Endowment Poetry Award, the National Hispanic Heritage Award, the American Book Award, the Southwest Book Award, and the Vogelstein Foundation Award. He received a bachelor's degree in English in 1984 and a Ph.D. in literature in 2003 from the University of New Mexico.

Growing up in the barrios of New Mexico, Baca was deserted by his parents, lived with his grandparents briefly, and ended up in an orphanage, but as Baca says, "I was in the streets most of the time. So consequently, what happened was my relationships with people were based on destruction." By age 16 he had been in county jail "about 20 times for assault and battery with the police" and by his late teens he was sent to prison for "possession with the intent to distribute drugs," He insists he was innocent of the drug charges, a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"If you keep a man in a cell in total darkness and you leave that man there for three to four or five years," Baca says, "You are depriving him of all sensual stimulation, all sensory stimulation; to exist that person has ... to resort to the imagination ... to other realms of reality that will let him exist."

Baca resorted to words to express his pain, anguish, loneliness, and struggle.

"I think the real impetus of my writing began when I looked out the window of my cage one day and said, 'the world doesn't want me. I'm not accepted by the world. So whatever I write, I will bring the world to me.'" In the beginning, he was not concerned with the craft of poetry, so much as the passion. "I was influenced by men living

in prison and life at its most brutal edge, and I knew that if I wrote, it would have to be with that passionate cry ... I had to depend upon the emotions of a child."

Emerging from prison a self-taught writer who then honed his craft through more writing and pursuing university degrees, Baca continues his passionate cry and expression inspired by lifelong dreams.

"I listened to these dreams I was having, very powerful, powerful dreams," Baca says. "I was listening to visions and seeing visions ... and flying around in these visions that were incredible, and all of that is the impetus for me becoming who I am today ... They interpret my life ... these visions that have come to me in my sleep, and in my waking hours, and these moments where people have suffered and loved, are forever with me, and those are the things that determine what kind of literature I'm going to write. Not something that the *Hudson Review* prints ..."

Baca is enthusiastic that Chicanos have "developed a body of people who have learned how to write and interpret - meaning scholars, critics, writers ... most of the funding centers in this country are urging Chicanos and Chicanas to come ... and there are all kinds of touring art groups now in the country, and there [are] a lot of publications of Mexicanos and Chicanos. The world is saying 'We need you.'"

He works with at-risk youths, giving workshops to homeless teens, kids in juvenile detention, and prison inmates. He believes that poetry can give a voice to individuals whose feelings and thoughts otherwise might not be heard.

Baca is the author of poetry books including *Healing Earthquakes*, *Working in the Dark: Reflections on a Poet in the Barrio*, *Black Mesa Poems*, *Immigrants in Our Own Land*, and *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*, and a memoir, *A Place to Stand*.

For further information on the Baca lecture call (858) 822-0510 or visit the UCSD César E. Chávez web site at <http://blink.ucsd.edu/go/chavez>.

Media Contacts: Pat JaCoby, (858) 534-7404, or Jan Jennings, (858) 822-1684