

Sean Arce Bio

Sean Arce, co-founder and former director of the K-12 Mexican American Studies Department in Tucson, Arizona, received the first Myles Horton Award for Teaching People's History from the Zinn Education Project (ZEP) on April 2, 2012. ZEP honored Arce "for his instrumental role in nurturing one of the most significant and successful public school initiatives on the teaching of history in the United States."

Arce comes by his passions honestly. His father, Edmundo Arce, was a glazer and iron worker in the San Francisco Bay Area whose union struggles gave Sean his first taste for social justice. His mother, Ana Maria Padilla Arce, worked as a translator in the Alameda County Courts in California, giving voice to those unable to speak English as they navigated the American legal and financial worlds. Both parents, who were born and raised in Tucson, instilled a sense of service to others in him.

After playing football at San Jose State, Arce came to the University of Arizona where he began to take Mexican American Studies classes; his world was forever transformed. "It was highly engaging for me," he says. "I began to make connections and to establish a greater understanding of my history, my community, and the lived realities of Chicanas/os-Mexicanas/os. It (Chicana/o Studies) really inspired me, along with a lot of my *camaradas* who were at UA at the time. We were Mexican American Studies majors and were also part of M.E.Ch.A. (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) which strengthened our commitment to *nuestros barrios*, our community. It was at that time where we began planning and acting towards creating a comprehensive K-12 Chicana/o Studies program in Tucson."

In short time they created the now dismantled Mexican American Studies program at Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) at the K-12 levels. "The actual planning took place with university students, educators and community folks, *veteranas/os*," he notes. "We created this understanding of why it's so important to have culturally, socially and historically responsive education in Tucson. We understood the push out (dropout) rate and the abysmal educational conditions that Mexican American / Raza youth have been traditionally subjected to in Tucson."

At its essence it was a grass roots effort accompanied by a very solid academic plan. Arce and the framers of the program did the research as to how to make the material age appropriate and highly engaging for the students in order to make it work and for students to achieve academically and develop a strong sense of cultural identity that they could be proud of.

Since Arce started in 1998, the program had grown from a single American History-Mexican American Perspective class to some 45 high school level graduation requirement classes throughout TUSD, and more classes at the k-12 level. "This program is unique – the only one in the nation that's come to fruition as a k-12 Mexican American studies program," Arce says with pride. "It's been challenging but also very gratifying to see it go from the planning of a department to its peak before the State of Arizona and TUSD dismantled the program."

Moreover, in the face of the political attacks from the State of Arizona and his own school district who cowered to the discriminatory anti-Mexican American Studies law (HB 2281), Arce helped create, facilitate and sustain the Mexican American Studies program in TUSD wherein over a 14 year period: Mexican American / Raza youth who took Mexican American Studies (MAS) classes graduated at higher rates than their peers who did not take the classes; Mexican American / Raza youth who took MAS classes closed (and for the majority of the years surpassed) the pervasive academic achievement gap between Mexican American / Raza youth and white youth; and students who took MAS classes matriculated to college/universities at higher rates than students who did not take MAS classes (See Cambium Audit of TUSD MAS commissioned by the Arizona Department of Education).

Despite being fired in retaliation by TUSD for speaking out against his own district's enforcement of the discriminatory HB 2281, Arce – a long time effective Chicano urban educator is working tirelessly to restore the Mexican American Studies program after it has been dismantled by the State of Arizona and TUSD. Arce is currently engaged in two lawsuits – one where he is serving as *Guardian Ad Litem* (next best friend of) for his 15 year old daughter Maya Isabel Arce in challenging the constitutionality of HB 2281 in the Federal District Court of Arizona (www.SaveEthnicStudies.org) – and the other where he (and fellow MAS maestro Jose Gonzalez) are defending themselves in a \$1 million dollar frivolous defamation suit (<http://threesonorans.com/raza-defense-fund/>) brought upon by an operative of Arizona Attorney General Tom Horne, the architect of HB 2281.