

Latino author's fame no easy task

Dad believed people were like money. If you were a million-dollar person, you had a grip on things, a big house maybe, and a crowd of suckers you could push around. You could be ... even a ten-, five- or one-dollar person. Below that, everybody was just nickels and dimes. To my dad, we were pennies.

— From "Parrot in the Oven: mi vida," by Victor Martinez

By Ann Griffith
Staff writer

PITTSBURG — For most of his life, author Victor Martinez was like a character in his novel, "flipping through more jobs than a thumb through a deck of cards."

As the grandson of Mexican immigrants, Martinez, 42, did anything — welding, harvesting, teaching — to bring in a few pennies and pay the rent.

He saved what he could and eventually quit his job so that he could write six hours a day, shut in his Mission District apartment. His wife, Tina, helped with bills.

After 20 years of struggling as an obscure writer, Martinez received the National Book Award in November for "Parrot in the Oven: mi vida," a novel about a 14-year-old Mexican-American boy published in 1996.

Martinez was one of the speakers Saturday at the "Latino

Voices" celebration of Hispanic culture and arts at Los Medanos College. He read from his novel, which took five years to write.

"Five years ago I said my dream (to be a successful author) was dead," said Martinez, who wore an over-sized yellow T-shirt and jeans.

"But I kept writing because it became another dream. I said there are not enough people out there like me, Chicanos, writing."

Now he is an inspiration for other Mexican Americans and anyone who has ever failed while pursuing a dream, a role he says makes him uncomfortable.

His book is a coming-of-age story about a boy who lives in poverty, with violence and racism.

"It was one book I will not forget. One book that was required that I liked to read," said Daniel

Gibson, 20, of Pittsburg. As an Hispanic, he said he identifies with the young hero in Martinez's book.

Martinez told the audience not to let prejudice, which is "someone else's problem," keep them from getting an education.

He remembers the time one teacher called Martinez's family derogatory names.

"I knew that I was hurt, but I also learned that you can not wait for someone's blessing," he said.

"You have to say 'I am a person of work, a writer, and I am going to go out in the world and grab it.'"

After he graduated from Fresno High School, Martinez was a welder, truck driver, office clerk and teacher — all the while pursuing his dream.

"Most Mexicans in that area were field workers or janitors," he said.

A teacher suggested he become a welder because he had brains.

"Because I was a Mexican, I think that's what she thought was a step up," Martinez said in his raspy voice, damaged by working in pesticide-laced fields.

Another teacher convinced him to go to college. He graduated from Fresno State, where his writing blossomed. From there, he went on to Stanford University.

The "Latino Voices" program also featured Los Cenzontles of San Pablo, backup vocalists in Los Lobos' album "Papa's Dream," Latin dancers and L.O.C.O.S. (Latinos or Chicanos or Something) Comedy Troupe.

The entertainment, as well as the audience, was a blend of Mexican and Mexican-American heritage. Some, like Martinez, call themselves Chicanos, a term sometimes applied to those of Mexican descent who live in the U.S.

Brentwood teacher Estella Santos, who shares Martinez's farm-worker background, wants him to speak to her Mexican-American freshmen English students. Too many of them end up dropping out of school, she said.

Santos thinks Martinez, who lives in the Bay Area, would be able to connect with her students.

Martinez could tell her students, "I've been where you are. I know your story," Santos said.



Staff photo/Jose C. Fajardo

Victor Martinez reads a passage from his book during the 'Latino Voices' celebration Saturday at Los Medanos College.

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