

THE DAVIS enterprise

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YOLO COUNTY NEWS

99 CENTS

Search 

HOME

NEWS

FORUM

SPORTS

FEATURES

ARTS

BUSINESS

OBITUARIES

COMICS

GALLERY

CLASSIFIEDS

COMMENTARY

ADVERTISERS

CONTACT US

Raised by lawyers, a social justice advocate



Daniel Olmos and his wife, Erika Strand, and son Gabriel on the White House lawn in April 2011. Courtesy photo

By **Adrian Glass-Moore**

From page A1 | June 03, 2014 |

Not many Harvard University graduates choose to take their talents to Compton.

While he watched his classmates take lucrative investment-banking jobs, Daniel Olmos had a different idea when he graduated in 1999: to teach at Roosevelt Elementary school in the Los Angeles County city where per capita income is less than half the state average and 26 percent live below the poverty line.

"It was transformative," Olmos said on a recent Tuesday morning, sitting in the back yard of his South Davis home with his wife, Erika Strand, a longtime educator.

The experience cemented his passion for social justice and civil rights, and this month Olmos will receive the National Immigrant Justice Center's Human Rights Award in recognition of his advocacy for undocumented immigrants and prison reform, issues he worked on as a lawyer and adviser at the U.S. Department of Justice and the White House from 2010 to 2013.

Born in Fresno in 1978, Olmos grew up thinking that practicing law was the last thing in the world he would do — the result of being raised in a family of civil rights lawyers.

His father, California's first Mexican-American Superior Court judge, died in a car accident when Olmos was 12. His mother is a law professor at UC Berkeley specializing in social justice. And his stepfather is a civil rights lawyer for Native American tribes.

But since graduating from Boalt Hall School of Law at UC Berkeley in 2004, Olmos has enthusiastically followed in his family's footsteps, starting out as a public defender in Contra Costa.

"I was taught early on that a meaningful life has nothing to do with money," Olmos said of his upbringing. "It has to do with helping people."

After clerking for two federal judges and joining a criminal defense practice, in 2010 he was tapped by Larry Tribe, a Harvard Law School professor, to help him start up the Justice Department's Access to Justice initiative, a program to improve the accessibility of criminal defense services for the poor and middle class.

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U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder has called the poor's limited access to legal services a "crisis as difficult and intransigent as any now before us."

With dark stubble that matched his black polo T-shirt, Olmos remembered his work in Washington, D.C., with a mix of pride and exasperation.

"It was fulfilling," he said, specifically his work pressuring the federal government to pay for legal representation for poor immigrants. But the idea was not readily accepted. "I spent a lot of time feeling frustrated," he recalled.

Immigration rights and prison reform, two of Olmos' passions, crossed when he spearheaded the Prison Rape Elimination Act and insisted that the law, which aimed to reduce sexual assaults on inmates, apply to immigration detention facilities too. For his work on PREA he was awarded the Attorney General's Award for Distinguished Service in 2012.

That year, Olmos began working for the White House as a senior policy adviser on criminal justice and immigration, helping write a landmark policy known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals that protects undocumented immigrants from deportation if they arrived in the U.S. before age 16 and if they meet a litany of other criteria.

DACA tried to answer the question, "How can we help the DREAMers?" Olmos said, using a term to describe the undocumented immigrants who would be offered a path to citizenship under the federal DREAM Act, the hotly debated bill that has not passed.

Those who fill out a DACA application admit to the Department of Homeland Security that they are in the country illegally, and if their petition is successful, the government promises not to deport them for two years. To qualify they must have at least a high school level education, fewer than three misdemeanors, among other guidelines.

"My job was to narrow those exceptions" in order to make the program available to more people, Olmos said.

Strand, working as a college counselor at Wheaton High School near Washington, D.C., said she saw first-hand the undocumented students who face limited opportunities because of their status and that it was painful to advise them.

"It's a really delicate balance because you want to acknowledge all of their incredibly hard work," she said. "But you also need to have an honest conversation about going to college and paying for college, and those are hard conversations to have" with someone lacking U.S. citizenship.

After having their second child, the couple decided it was time to return to California, and chose Davis because of the strong school district and proximity to Olmos' mother and stepfather, who moved to Davis in 2001.

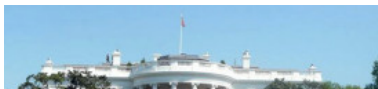
"There was no place, literally, in the world, we would rather raise our kids than here," Olmos said. "All the ideas we had about Davis are true."

Even though Olmos is now out of the political fray, returning to work for criminal defense firm Nolan, Armstrong and Barton in 2013, he remains indignant about the issues he cares about, especially prison reform and mass incarceration.

"I view it as my generation's civil rights movement," he argued. "It's unsustainable, both fiscally and on a human level."

On that front, though, Olmos is optimistic. He noted that reducing prison populations is beginning to find support from both Democrats and Republicans.

"Anytime Newt Gingrich and I agree on something," he said with a grin, "maybe there's a real possibility for change."



Comments

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News

Nominees sought for city's human rights awards

By Special to The Enterprise | From Page: A1

STEM-Tastic Sunday highlights summer opportunities

By Chloe Lessard | From Page: A1 | Gallery

Budget standoff leaves California college hopefuls in limbo

By The Associated Press | From Page: A1

State to supply just 20 percent of water

By The Associated Press | From Page: A2

For the record

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A2

Pets of the week

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A3 | Gallery

Tuleyome needs volunteers for work party

By Special to The Enterprise | From Page: A4 | Gallery

Winter market wraps up Wednesday

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A4

Alcoholic liver disease strikes Hispanics years earlier

By Special to The Enterprise | From Page: A4

Get a taste of Middle Earth at library

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A5

Bingo games Sunday will benefit DHS

Pedal power: It's a different kind of March Madness

By Felicia Alvarez | From Page: A1 | Gallery

County: Baby Justice was on Social Services' radar

By Lauren Keene | From Page: A1 | Gallery

House to vote on Homeland bill without conditions

By The Associated Press | From Page: A2

Bob Dunning: Rampant crime on the streets of Davis

By Bob Dunning | From Page: A2, 1 Comment | Gallery

Appeals court upholds protection for threatened seabird

By The Associated Press | From Page: A2

Grant applications for Davis Cooperative Community Fund due soon

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A3

'Pearls Before Swine' joins daily comics lineup

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A4

Public broadband, on 'Davisville'

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A4

Embroiderers will discuss needlework tools

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A4

Holmes' talent showcased

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A5 | Gallery

Go all in for fun at Texas Hold 'Em tournament

Madrigals' trip

By Special to The Enterprise | From Page: A5

DCC Nursery School hosts open house

By Special to The Enterprise | From Page: A5

Join a fitness party at Zumba class

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A5

Sure and begorrah!

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A6

Cycle de Mayo kicks off Bike Month

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A6

High school seniors invited to apply for Yolo Youth Service Award scholarships

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A6

By Special to The Enterprise | From Page: A5

Baldini gets more conducting assignments with San Francisco Symphony

By Jeff Hudson | From Page: A5 | Gallery

Logos Books hosts conversation groups, poetry readings

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A5

Overeaters get support at meetings

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A6Comments are off for this post

Klein's book featured at Authors on the Move

By Special to The Enterprise | From Page: A6

City says it did not OK Ygrene mailers

By Dave Ryan | From Page: A6

Forum**The kids aren't interested**

By Creators Syndicate | From Page: B5

Act for our children's future

By Letters to the Editor | From Page: A8

End the use of this word

By Letters to the Editor | From Page: A8

Tom Meyer cartoon

By Debbie Davis | From Page: A8

One more family insult

By Creators Syndicate | From Page: B5

UCD alums will want to stay

By Letters to the Editor | From Page: A8

Thanks for act of kindness

By Letters to the Editor | From Page: A8

Cannery CFD creates unequal taxation patchwork

By Special to The Enterprise | From Page: A8

Climate changes are inevitable

By Letters to the Editor | From Page: A8

Sports**Lady Blue Devils in semis Tuesday night**

By Enterprise staff | From Page: B1

Dream run ends for Davis' master wrestlers

By Evan Ream | From Page: B1 | Gallery

In the Clubhouse: Summerhays Jr. talks about new post at El Macero CC

By Bruce Gallaudet | From Page: B1 | Gallery

Newly acquired Smith scores in Sharks' victory

By The Associated Press | From Page: B3 | Gallery

Blue Devil girls look for revenge in the pool

By Kellen Browning | From Page: B10 | Gallery

Aggie men host two big ones this week

By Enterprise staff | From Page: B1

Devil boys net an easy tennis victory

By Enterprise staff | From Page: B1 | Gallery

Problem solved: DHS girls finish eight times in soccer win

By Evan Ream | From Page: B1

Sports briefs: Aggie lacrosse team takes home opener

By Enterprise staff | From Page: B3

DHS boys aim to repeat as section swim champs

By Kellen Browning | From Page: B10

Features

Name Droppers: Dunn graduates from Marine Corps basic training

By Enterprise staff | From Page: A7 | Gallery

Arts

Thursday Live! features Keith Cary, Wyatt Hesemeyer

By Special to The Enterprise | From Page: A9

‘Woyzeck’ cast lives up to high expectations

By Bev Sykes | From Page: A9

Songs of the Civil War to be performed by Anonymous 4

By Jeff Hudson | From Page: A9 | Gallery

Davis Chorale starts year with demanding music

By Special to The Enterprise | From Page: A9

Business

Obituaries

Dieter W. Gruenwedel

By Special to The Enterprise | From Page: A4

Otto Vasak

By Special to The Enterprise | From Page: A4

Comics

Comics: Tuesday, March 3, 2015 (set 1)

By Creator | From Page: B5

Comics: Tuesday, March 3, 2015 (set 2)

By Creator | From Page: B7

Live	Design an Ad 2015
Timeline	Student Housing Directory 2015
Commentary	Real Estate Review Friday, February 20, 2015
Print Edition	Yolo Magazine – January 2015
Facebook Page	Ready, Set, Shop! 2014
Twitter Feed	Home for the Holidays 2014
Comings & Goings	Breast Cancer Awareness Month 2014

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