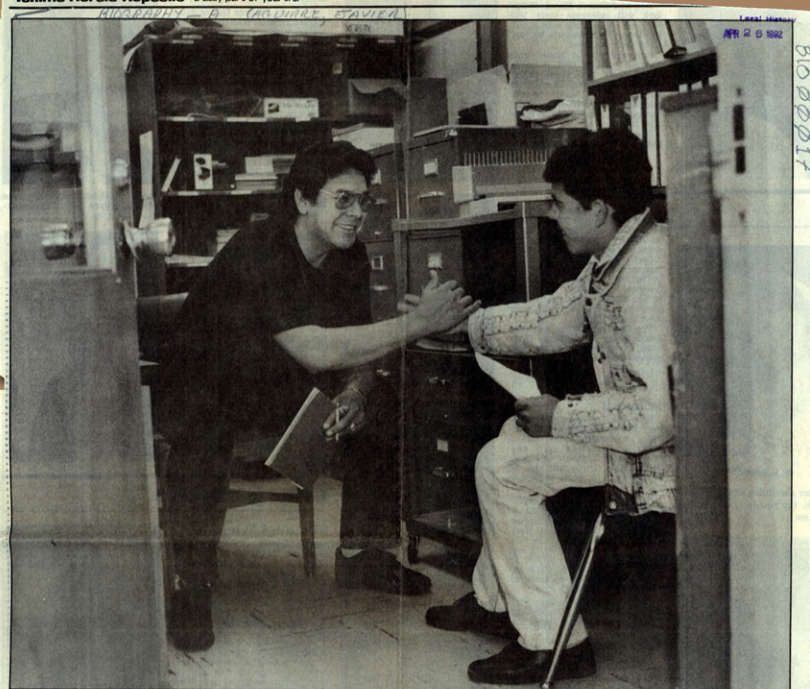


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Wapato teacher Javier Aguirre congratulates Manuel Bravo after the student did well on an oral English test he had failed three times previously.

A long and successful journey

Wapato teacher offers himself as example for migrant students

By GREG TUTTLE

Of the Herald-Republic

WAPATO — It doesn't take much for Javier Aguirre to put himself in his students' place.

The 46-year-old Sunnyside man knows all too well how difficult it can be to try and learn from a teacher who doesn't speak the same language — let alone make friends at school.

He knows how it feels to attend as many schools as it takes to get through the 12th grade.

He knows the shame.

Aguirre also knows, through his own experience, that success for migrant students is not only possible, but probable given the right commitment by schools, parents and the students themselves.

He offers himself as an example.

"I've lived through the bigotry and

racism," he said. "I've lived through poverty and a gang lifestyle and I came out somewhere at the other end of the tunnel. I came out a teacher."

Aguirre has taught English as a Second Language to migrant students at Wapato High School since 1986. The ESL classes are state funded and aimed at helping migrant students get the language skills they need to succeed in school.

But before becoming a teacher, Aguirre worked a myriad of jobs. He has been a Peace Corps volunteer in Columbia, the administrator of the Chileano Art Academy in California, a social worker and private business owner. He is a regular opinion writer for a Washington D.C.-based publication called "Hispanic Link," and was recently sworn in as an interpreter for the Yakima County Superior Court.

He also has picked fruit and veg-

etables in fields from Oregon to Texas. The seventh-born in a family with 14 children, Aguirre's journey from the fields to the classroom has been a long one.

His parents left Mexico for Texas in 1948. With five children the family settled in Sacorro where Aguirre's father worked on a dairy farm.

The job lasted several years and times for the Aguirre family were not bad. Javier was born in 1952.

While still an infant his father lost the dairy job and to make ends meet the family picked cotton. Javier attended the Sacorro public school until the second grade when the family moved to El Paso.

There Aguirre's father found a job in a smelter, but lost the job when he was burned in a fire. The sight of his father in the hospital is one of Aguirre's most vivid early childhood memories.

"I remember going to see him in the hospital and his whole body was burned," he recalls. "He lost his job for that. There was no workers' compensation then."

When he was in the fourth grade his

family sold everything and traveled with 12 other families to Woodburn, Ore., for the strawberry harvest.

The entire family worked in the strawberry fields, Aguirre remembers, and he didn't get the chance to return to the fourth grade that year. At the end of the season the family, now with eight children, purchased a 1947 jeep and headed for Arizona.

When they arrived in Chandler, Ariz., the prospects for work were bleak. Aguirre remembers the family being approached in a parking lot by a Methodist preacher who offered his father a job and the family a home if they would join his congregation.

"All we knew him as was the preacher," Aguirre said. "We were pretty fortunate. He found my father and brother a job and enrolled us kids in school. All that they wanted of us was that we go to church."

But as was to become a pattern, the family soon had to leave Chandler when his father's job ended. This time the

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Originally published in the Yakima Herald-Republic on April 26, 1992

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Local History

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family moved to California where they could once again find work in the fields.

When they arrived in Modesto, Calif., Aguirre said he remembers his father stopping in front of a small garage and proclaiming it their new home.

"He said this is where we are staying. My mother started to cry."

For two months the family worked in a peach orchard, then moved north to Livingston to work the grape harvest. The Aguirres lived in a camp with 30 families and Javier made it to school. He was in the fifth grade.

"My dad sent us to school. He made damn sure we got up to catch the bus."

By now Aguirre was finding some success in school, despite his lack of English language skills. No one in his family spoke English and he got by the best he could.

Once again the family moved, this time to Salinas to work a broccoli harvest while living in a labor camp. After broccoli they cut cabbage, then moved to Corbin where Aguirre's father was hired as a cotton gin operator.

The family lived in a trailer with no plumbing. Aguirre entered the sixth grade.

"We were there two months and picked up and moved again. I never understood why."

Finally, the Aguirres settled down in Visalia, Calif., in the San Joaquin Valley. Aguirre's father was hired as a ranch hand and the family moved into a home on the rancher's property. For the first time all the Aguirre children could attend school at the same time.

Javier graduated from high school in 1970 and joined the Peace Corps rather than follow his brother to Vietnam. The Peace Corps sent him to Columbia where he taught Spanish to other volunteers and worked with nurses providing health care in small communities.

Two years later three Peace Corps volunteers were killed by terrorists and the volunteers were sent home.

While still in Columbia Aguirre had applied to San Diego State University and was accepted. He entered college and "it's been a normal life ever since," he said.

But the years traveling from one crop to the next have never left Aguirre. He has strong feelings about many things, but perhaps none as strong as his feelings about migrant education.

"It's different today," he said. "I see kids today being coddled. I see kids coming out of junior high school and reading at the fifth-grade level."

Part of the problem, he said, is

that schools pass students along through the grades, and eventually to graduation, without any real education behind them.

He calls such students "academically abused," and uses the term often to describe the public school's handling of migrant students.

"If you're failing, that's OK 'cause we'll help you make it," he said. "If you want to graduate with a D average, that's OK, we'll give you a degree."

He said the result over the last 10 years is now being seen in parents with poor education sending students to school unprepared. It's a circle of ignorance that has led to problems of youth gangs, teen pregnancy and drug abuse, he said.

"Is it the (school) system? Yes, I believe it is the system," he said. "I figure if we start graduating real human beings they'll start producing real human beings."

With such strong feelings, Aguirre makes it his job to change the system — one student at a time.

With a knowing style, Aguirre is able to reach the 30 or so migrant students that attend his class every day. Each student who attends the hour-long sessions with Aguirre is expected to learn not only English, but also the skills to succeed in school and beyond.

His classroom is a mixture of rewards and punishments, respect and fear. He uses logic problems to teach his students English and "the skills of being a student."

"I push really hard," he said. "But it's worth it. I believe a kid should be mainstreamed as soon as possible."

"I try to teach a year's worth of algebra in three months — really push," Aguirre continued, his voice emphatic. "The surprising thing is it works. You come to me from Mexico I will teach you English in 90 days and put you in the classroom."

"I'm willing to bet that most of my ESL students after six months can manipulate the English language better than (native) English speakers."

For Aguirre it's a matter of responsibility — not only his, but for the public schools, parents and the students themselves. He is driven and expects others to be driven as well. He knows the alternatives.

"Don't be satisfied with an \$8-an-hour job," he tells his students. "We're not talking about getting wealthy — we're talking about not having to get your wife up in the morning to go pick apples."