

Biography



Wallace R. Davis

March 21, 1935 – November 12, 1994

By Mrs. Mota

Our school is named after Wallace R. Davis. When Mr. Davis was little, they called him “Wally.” He was born in Santa Ana. He was Mexican, Native American, and Irish. He grew up in “La Colonia 17,” in a little wooden house. He thought it was the best place in the world to grow up. The house had a stove that burned wood, the toilet was outside, and there was no hot water heater. There were fields and animals around the house that he liked, and the neighbors all knew each other. When he was a grown man, he realized that people probably thought he grew up poor, or in poverty as they say. But he said, “Poverty is not living in a small house...it is living in a small world, without hopes and dreams.”

When Wally began school, it was hard for him because he did not speak English and the schools were segregated. That means they did not let the white kids, the black kids, or the Mexican kids go to the same school. Then, when he was only six, he had to leave his mother because she had Tuberculosis. That is a very infectious disease, and the authorities always isolate people who have it. Well, Wally went to live with a foster family, and the father of that family was not very understanding of little kids. The foster father got mad at Wally one night at the dinner table. To punish Wally, the man picked the little boy up, carried him outside, and threw him out into a trash pit in the back yard. In those days, they did not have garbage collection so people just dug a big hole and threw garbage in it. This is where little Wally landed, barefoot, near sharp tin cans and broken glass.

It made Wally feel terrible to be treated this way. It made him feel like nobody cared for him. But Wally realized, “I care for myself,” and he said to himself, “I’ll get out of this hole.” And he did get out.

Wally’s mother died from Tuberculosis and he was raised by his grandparents, Mama Candi and Papa Leandro who gave him generous amounts of love. Wally helped support his family by working in the fields picking crops when he was in grade school. But his grandfather did not want him working so much because he wanted Wally to concentrate on his schoolwork.

When Wally was growing up, he encountered racism. Sometimes people said, “No Mexicans allowed here,” or, if they were allowed, they had to sit in the back of the movie theater. Sometimes people would ask Wally, “What’s your name?” and he would reply, “Wallace Davis.” Then they would say that it didn’t make sense to have a name like that because he was Mexican. Wally would always say, “I am who I am.”

Wally worked hard at school because he knew that education would help him follow his dreams. But when Wally was in high school, something happened that almost made him drop out of school. His loving grandfather, who was like a father to him, died. Besides the terrible pain of missing his grandfather, Wally had to work harder than ever to support his family. He worked full time at night and on weekends. Plus he went to all his classes. How could he do this and still get enough sleep? But he was not content just working and studying. He somehow found the time to form a

band in which he played the saxophone and clarinet. He played on the basketball and football teams and was Class President. He graduated from Garden Grove High School in 1954. In all the hard things that he did, how many times did he remember being thrown in the garbage pit and climbing out of that hole? He had to believe in himself.

Wally went into the Army. Then he went to California State University, Long Beach. A lot of university students do not have jobs because their parents pay for them to go to school. Going to school is their only job. But not Wally. He needed to work to support himself and his grandmother. He had a humble job, and people looked at him in a way that showed they didn't think he would ever finish school with a college degree. But he did get his degree, and he went to UCLA Law School. When he got his law degree, he was the first Latino, Spanish-speaking attorney in Santa Ana! In all the hard things that he did, how many times did he remember being thrown in the garbage pit and climbing out of that hole? If he could get out of that hole, he could do anything. He had to believe in himself.

As an attorney, Wallace Davis fought for the rights of children. At one time, many Latino children were being put into classes for mentally retarded children just because they could not pass a test in English to show how smart they were. Mr. Davis brought a law suit against Santa Ana School District and was successful in getting that district and others in the United States to be careful how they tested children. He also fought for the rights of his Native American relatives, the Juaneño Band of Mission Indians. He worked in many organizations that worked for the rights of students and minorities.

Wallace Davis was married to his wife, Irmgaard, for 33 years, and they had seven children. He supported them all through college. He died in 1994. He started out poor - he was an orphan, he was thrown into a garbage pit, he was a field worker, a factory worker, a janitor, a musician, an attorney, and finally, a very well respected leader in Santa Ana and Orange County. People remember him for all his hard work and achievements, but most of all, they remember him for his personal warmth and caring. He said, "Dream big...and once you have that dream, don't let anyone take it away from you. You must have faith in tomorrow...we must have faith in you."



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