Gustavo Arellano’s “Ask a Mexican” Column
USES THE PROFANE TO CREATE, EXPAND NATIONAL CONVERSATION ON RACE AND ETHNICITY

BY DEREK OLSON

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USES THE PROFANE TO CREATE, EXPAND NATIONAL CONVERSATION ON RACE AND ETHNICITY

When colleagues arrive each morning, they usually hear a disembodied Arellano in the background. He’s probably again drenched under his desk to muffle his loud voice during an important interview. He has the uncanny ability to already be in when others arrive.

At 28, Arellano’s early success can’t be explained away by luck. Although he graduated from Chapman University, he didn’t major in journalism or get a boost from some beneficent journalism professor who happened to stash an internship hook-up for the class such up. Arellano just wrote a letter to OC Weekly and impressed former editor Will Swain so much that he was invited to freelance. Arellano’s consistent and irreverent work eventually earned him a full-time gig and then a promotion to News and Investigative Editor.

Arellano also credits Swain for putting him up to doing the “Ask a Mexican” column for the first time. Like many genius moments, it came out of a deadline driven brainstorming session after a story fell through last minute. The first and many subsequent columns weren’t always well received. He was blasted from the anti-immigration front for giving a voice to Mexicans, and called a sellout by some Mexicans for playing into stereotypes.

“I get it from all sides,” he says. “To me, that’s just an indication that I’m doing my job. I’m an investigative reporter, so, of course, I have thick skin.”

The questions he answers are sometimes blatantly racist, bizarre, and even sexual in nature, but Arellano’s business is dispelling myths. And, he’s ready to slaughter any sacred cows along the way. “I’ve never regressed anything I’ve ever said. Regret is one of the worst emotions you can inflict on yourself,” he says. “If you’re not prepared to deal with that, then you shouldn’t write.”

However readers feel about him, they have overwhelmingly turned to his column each week. As journalism professors all over the country cynically inform students that newspapers don’t cover minorities for business reasons, Arellano seems to have found an audience. He’s now syndicated in 22 publications including one in far-flung Jackson, Wyoming.

As he reappeared at Libreria Martínez, the crowd went into a frenzy and jockeyed to get one of the extra copies he’d brought back. Five minutes later, all were sold out again.

Will “Ask A Mexican” last? Or will it become relic of a time when Hispanic Americans were still struggling to find a voice? Either way, Arellano is ready to take his popularity in stride. He’s riding the wave, but when it passes, he’ll still be digging through documents and university archives.

His next big project, due out in 2008, to be published by Scribner’s, is a history of Orange County.

Dear Mexican: My grandparents were Dutch on one side and Irish on the other—but they came here legally, through Ellis Island. What I can’t stand are a bunch of fence-hopping, river-wading illegals telling me I owe them a free education, health care and transportation. Making these people citizens simply because they’re here is like letting someone keep my car just because he already stole it.

Angry Gabacho Goes Really Off

Dear AGGRO: Wake up and smell the tacos. Your letter contains enough inaccuracies, misrepresentations and logical fallacies to qualify as a quiz for high school rhetoric students. Prime-number, you begin by saying that immigrants don’t bother you, then switch courses by bashing illegal immigrants. It’s fine to distinguish between the two, but don’t offer qualifiers when arguing a point—they weaken your conclusion. Also, illegal immigrants aren’t demanding free anything—just amnesty for millions.

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