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Jaime Escalante, Inspiration for a Movie, Dies at 79

By WILLIAM GRIMES
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Jaime Escalante, the high school teacher whose ability to turn out high-achieving calculus students from a poor Hispanic neighborhood in East Los Angeles inspired the 1988 film "Stand and Deliver," with Edward James Olmos in the starring role, died Tuesday at his son's home in Rosedale, Calif. He was 79 and lived in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

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Warner Brothers, via Associated Press

Jaime Escalante, right, and the actor who portrayed him in the 1988 hit movie "Stand and Deliver," Edward James Olmos.

The cause was pulmonary arrest brought on by pneumonia, his son Jaime said.

Mr. Escalante, a Bolivian immigrant, used unconventional techniques to explain mathematical problems and to convince his students at James A. Garfield High School, known for its dismal test scores and high drop-out rate, that they could compete with students from wealthier schools. Rock 'n' roll records played at full blast, remote-controlled toys and magic tricks were all brought into play.

"Calculus need not be made easy," read one of the motivational signs in Mr. Escalante's classroom. "It is easy already."

In 1982, 18 students in the special calculus program that Mr. Escalante had created at Garfield four years earlier took the College Board's advanced placement test in calculus. Seven of them received a 5, the highest possible score; the rest, a 4.

Officials at the company administering the test suspected cheating and asked 14 students to take the exam again. A dozen did, and their performance validated the original results.

Mr. Olmos's performance in "Stand and Deliver" earned him an Oscar nomination for best actor and turned Mr. Escalante into an educational hero. The year of the film, Henry Holt published "Escalante: The Best Teacher in America," by Jay Mathews.

"He was working with a group of students who did not have much in life," said Erika T. Camacho, who took algebra with Mr. Escalante and now teaches mathematics at Arizona State University. "They were told that they were not good enough and would not amount to much. He told them that with desire and discipline, they could do anything."

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Jaime Alfonso Escalante Gutiérrez was born on Dec. 31, 1930, in La Paz, where his parents were elementary school teachers. He taught physics and mathematics there for several years before political unrest led him to emigrate with his family to the United States in 1963.

In addition to his son Jaime, Mr. Escalante is survived by his wife, Fabiola, another son, Fernando, of Elk Grove, Calif., and six grandchildren.

While attending Pasadena College, where he earned an associate degree in arts in 1969, Mr. Escalante worked as a busboy in a coffee shop and as a cook. He later found work testing computers at the Burroughs Corporation while studying mathematics at California State University in Los Angeles, where he earned a bachelor's degree in 1973.

After receiving his teacher's certificate from Cal State in 1974, he began teaching at Garfield. The events telescoped into a single year in "Stand and Deliver" unfolded over a much longer time. Beginning with five calculus students in 1978, Mr. Escalante developed a program that eventually attracted hundreds of students keen to go on to college. In 1988, 443 students took the College Board's advanced placement test; 266 passed.

Success, acclaim and the celebrity status that came with "Stand and Deliver" brought strife. Mr. Escalante butted heads with the school's administration and fellow teachers, some jealous of his fame, others worried that he was creating his own fief. The teacher's union demanded that his oversubscribed calculus classes be brought down in size.

In 1991, Mr. Escalante left Garfield to teach at Hiram Johnson High School in Sacramento. Without him, Garfield's calculus program withered. In 2001 he retired and returned to Bolivia.

Mr. Escalante always impressed on his students the importance of "ganas" — desire. "I'll make a deal with you," he once told his class. "I'll teach you math, and that's your language. You're going to go to college and sit in the first row, not in the back, because you're going to know more than anybody."

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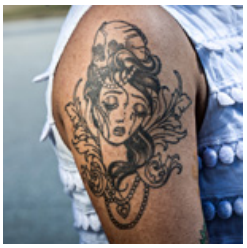

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