

## REFLECTIONS ON JAMIE ESCALANTE

Jamie Escalante was born in La Paz, Bolivia and taught school there for 9 years. When he emigrated to America he wanted to continue teaching but could not speak English. Consequently he was forced to work as a busboy to put himself through school. Today he is recognized as one of the most famous teachers in the world. In 1989 he won the Hispanic Heritage Award. The next year he was presented with the Public Service Jefferson Award. He has received more than 50 awards from educational and professional organizations and in 1999 was inducted into the National Teachers Hall of Fame. The achievement that propelled him into national fame was his calculus program at Garfield High. This school is in a disadvantaged district of east Los Angeles, CA. In 1988 both a book and a movie celebrated his success. The book was: "Escalante: The Best Teacher in America". The movie was: "Stand and Deliver".

Jerry Jesness laments that the Hollywood movie created the false illusion that Escalante took inner city Hispanics from basic math to calculus in only a single year. In reality, he states, "It took 10 years to bring Escalante's program to peak success." In fact, Escalante himself was initially so discouraged that after only two hours in class he called a former employer and asked for his old job back. However, when he found a dozen students willing to take algebra he changed his mind. His first class in calculus did not happen for 5 long years.

Obviously, good calculus students are not created in a vacuum. They must first master many basic math skills in "feeder classes". Escalante's full program took several years to develop. His first calculus class at Garfield High was in 1979. He had 5 students and only 2 passed the Advanced Placement test. The next year he had 9 students and 7 passed the exam. In 1981 he had 15 students and only 1 failed the test. 1982 was the year featured in the movie. That year 18 students passed the A. P. calculus exam, but 14 had such

high grades that they were accused of cheating. 12 agreed to be retested and did well enough to have their scores reinstated. The other 2 declined to be retested as they didn't need the credit for college.

In reflecting on this remarkable story two truths rise to the surface like cream on milk. The first involves the necessity of hard work and sacrifice. Escalante practiced "tough love" on his students and the results proved him right. He gave 100% and expected his students to do the same. He came to school an hour early and demanded that his students do the same. He required them to obey his rules or leave the class. They had to hand in their home work on time and if they did not pay proper attention he would hit them with a pillow. Since these students were poor and disadvantaged they had to overcome many obstacles to learn their lessons. The second truth involves the way that society has a tendency to resent and oppose those who dare to challenge the status quo. The custodian complained about having to come in early. The teacher's union also complained. In fact, Paul Craig Roberts charges bluntly that they ran him out of town. It seems he violated union rules by blowing the whistle on fellow teachers who were using the teachers' lounge as a real estate office and calling in sick to extend their weekends.

David W. Kirkpatrick spent more than a dozen years in leadership of such teachers' unions as the NEA, (National Education Assoc.) the AFT (American Federation of Teachers) etc. He lamented the fact that Escalante was harassed by the teachers' union. He wrote: "One of his 'sins' was accepting all students who wanted to be in his classes. As a result he had classes of more than 70 students, more than three times the number stipulated in the contract. Union representatives helped persuade teachers to vote him out as the math department chairman." After Escalante left the school the union bragged "we got him".

Escalante has retired to his native Bolivia. He is living in his

wife's hometown and teaching part time at the local university. He returns to the United States frequently to visit his children. When Jerry Jesness spoke to him recently he was entertaining the possibility of acting as an adviser to the Bush administration. Given what he achieved, he clearly has valuable advice to give.

As we reflect upon the life of Jamie Escalante and our personal commitment to Christ, let us dare to work as hard as he did and not be intimidated by the status quo.