OLIVAS FOLLOWS A HIGHER CALLING

BY FRANCINE PARKER

Growing up in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico in the 1950s, Michael A. Olivas was a dreamy young man with grand ideas of altruism and a passion for rock and roll.

Olivas thought his destiny was to follow a higher calling, that he would dedicate his life to service as a Catholic priest. After eight years of high school and college seminary, he decided he was wrong.

Olivas was called, not to serve a higher power, but to serve in higher education, which he has done admirably for more than 45 years. He has spent the last 35 years at the University of Houston where he teaches higher education, immigration and entertainment law.

In 1982, Olivas began his UH career as founding director of the Institute for Higher Education Law and Governance. Now, he not only directs the institute, but also holds the William B. Bates Distinguished Chair of Law. Olivas’ service to UH goes well beyond teaching, lecturing, mentoring, and publishing articles and textbooks. Olivas and his wife of 33 years, Augustina Reyes, a professor in the College of Education, serve as co-chairs of the faculty and staff portion of UH’s $1 billion “Here, We Go” campaign. The couple also pledged to match up to $100,000 of contributions made by faculty and staff. Additionally, Olivas served as acting president of the University of Houston-Downtown from February 2016 to April 2017.

“An Army brat, Olivas was born in Tokyo. After traveling from one country to another, his family finally settled in New Mexico, where Olivas flourished academically, and his love for rock and roll grew.

“When I was 11 or 12, I lied to my parents. I told them that I was going to a friend’s house. Instead, I went to a Little Richard concert,” Olivas said. “I spent all the money I had, which was about $3, on the ticket.”

In his youth, Olivas was greatly influenced by his father, who after leaving the Army, worked at a liquor store but aspired to achieve the American dream. Eventually, he received a bachelor’s degree in accounting and sent seven of his 10 children to college. Olivas was the eldest child, and like his father, he was studious, earning four degrees. It was during those college years that Olivas learned of his true calling.

“I realized that I was much better at afflicting the comfortable than I ever was with comforting the afflicted,” Olivas quipped.

It is that sharp wit as well as his eloquence and keen intellect that has marked Olivas’ career inside the classroom and outside academia. He is an oft-quoted pundit on immigration and higher education law in the news media. Olivas’ frank comments have drawn both praise and scorn, he noted, citing numerous “hate” emails he received.

Yet, Olivas plans to continue researching and writing about these issues after he leaves UH, and that time is near—at the end of the fall 2018 semester.

Olivas confessed that at 66, he and “Tina” are ready to retire to their Santa Fe home. In preparation for their new life, the couple sold their Spring Branch house and moved onto campus, settling into Callowhoun Lofts five years ago.

Now, Olivas is looking forward to spending more time with family, in a mystery novel and on his radio show, the “Law of Rock and Roll.” The show is featured on the Albuquerque National Public Radio station KNUW, other radio stations and KUHF, beginning after Labor Day.

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"I can't imagine a life better suited for me," said Olivas, leaning back in a chair, his hands clasped. "It always astounds me how blessed I am."

Dapper in a blue suit and striped tie, Olivas sat comfortably in his office, a hodgepodge of mementos, photographs, including a black-and-white photo of his father, and books ranging from "Sonia Sotomayor: Supreme Court Justice" to "Hip Hop and the Law."

A dozen or two CDs are stacked haphazardly on one of several bookcases. The sound of the greatest hits by R&B legend James Brown played on his CD player as he reminisced about his career and life.

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