

Princess Grace Honor Will Help CSUN Film Student Tell the Story of His Community

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When Cal State Northridge film student Henry Fernandez filled out an application earlier this year for a grant from the Princess Grace Foundation, he was looking for money to help finance his senior film project. He gave little thought to the prestige that would accompany the award if he won.

"Basically, I was just looking for a way to get our film done," Fernandez said. "The project, 'TAG,' is a personal story based on the experiences of my community in East L.A. I had made a commitment to my cast and crew, and to my community, and wanted to make sure that I got it done."

Fernandez said he is still trying to process the impact of the letter he received late last month from the foundation, informing him that he had been awarded a \$5,000 grant. "It was a surprise, and in some way I still can't believe it," he said. "But it's just an amazing gift. My professors tell me it's a great honor and, most importantly, it means that I can continue to tell my story."

Fernandez is the first CSUN student ever to receive a grant from the prestigious Princess Grace Foundation, which was established in the early 1980s to continue the legacy of Grace Kelly, Princess of Monaco, who throughout her lifetime anonymously helped emerging artists pursue their goals. Each year, the foundation announces a select group of Princess Grace Awards for distinction in the areas of theater, dance and film. Recipients have an opportunity to apply for more funds in the future.

"The Princess Grace Awards list usually contains the likes of USC, Juilliard and Cal Arts," said cinema and television arts professor Nate Thomas, head of CSUN's film option. "To see a Cal State Northridge film student on it makes my heart skip a beat. All of our film students are special and talented, but every once in a while certain students, like Henry Fernandez, come through that have a truly special talent and voice and you know that one day soon they will make a mark in this industry.

"I am not surprised that he has won this honor," Thomas continued. "He is an extremely talented writer and storyteller. His senior film project exemplifies this well. It is a personal story that Henry has been able to write and shoot with a certain sensibility that is lacking in many Hollywood films out there. This honor makes me feel like a proud father!"

Fernandez, 36, who was born and raised in East Los Angeles, said he owes much of what he has accomplished so far as a filmmaker to Thomas and everyone else in CSUN's Department of Cinema and Television Arts, especially in the screenwriting program. "Our professors in the department, they give you tough love, but they help you grow," he said.

Fernandez said that's what happened with his current project, "TAG," which caught the attention of the Princess Grace Foundation.

"I had written a precious film project, a comedy, about a Latino family making tamales during the holidays," Fernandez said. "Professor Thomas said it was good, but he also said he knew I had a better story to tell."



"TAG" examines the disconnect between the tagging crews of today and the older generations that continually witness their communities fall victim to the tagging craze. "It's a personal story that is relevant in cities across the world," Fernandez said, noting that a mural created at the height of the Chicano Movement on the side of a dry cleaner's business near his house was recently defaced by graffiti.

"It used to be that taggers would leave those murals alone because they represented the pride of the community," he said. "Not any more. I wanted to explore that in my film."

Fernandez initially attended the College of the Canyons in Santa Clarita in the early 1990s with the intention of playing baseball. When he blew out his shoulder, he transferred to East Los Angeles Community College and began taking general education classes and trying to figure out what he wanted to do with his life.

CSUN senior Film student Henry Fernandez. Right: Cinema and Television Arts Professor Nate Thomas (left) with Fernandez.

He was working for an insurance company and playing in a rock band at night, when his father suggested he take a stage managing class. His families had always dabbled in music and theater, performing and creating plays at family gatherings. His aunt, Evelina Fernández, is a respected writer/actress and artist and his uncle, Jose Luis Valenzuela, is artistic director of the Latino Theater Company.

Fernandez loved the class, but he wanted to do more than just work behind the scenes in theater. "I wanted to be able to tell stories, and reach a wider audience," Fernandez said.

He considered USC's and NYU's film schools, but a professor at UCLA suggested Northridge.

"He said Northridge has a really strong film department, and it was up and coming," Fernandez said. "I checked out the campus. I like the diversity and he was right about the film department. It really is going places."

He enrolled at CSUN in 2004 and expects to finish his education this fall. "TAG" is his last student project. He is hoping that the film, whose cast includes his aunt and established actors Castelo Guerra, Pepe Serna, Jonathan Hernandez and Ramiro Segovia, will make the cut for CSUN's Annual Student Film Showcase. Then it's off to the film festival circuit, where he hopes the 17-minute project will garner attention from industry professionals.

"I would like to tell the story to its fullest potential and stay true to my community," Fernandez said. "I think the time is right. All too often, people try to re-create East Los Angeles and tell us what our story is. You can't fake East L.A. It's time for us to tell more of our own stories."

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