

BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST



CRISJ Building Justice Podcast

Season 2, Episode 18: [Vice Mayor and City Councilmember Eric Guerra on his experience as a working class and first generation college student.](#)

Moderator: Political Science Professors Kristina Flores Victor and Monicka Tutschka

Guests: Vice Mayor and City Councilmember (D6) Eric Guerra.

Please note: This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact Professor Kristina Victor directly should you have questions.

Music lyrics:

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

[Prof. Monicka Tutschka] 0:24

Welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice. We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. I'm Monica Tucker, professor at SAC State, and I'm here with my political science colleague, Professor Kristina Flores Victor.

0:45

Kristina, you have an office three doors down from my office, and we're both in our offices right now, but we're talking over zoom on this beautiful campus. Hi. It's the first week of classes. It's a really busy time. How's the first week going?

[Prof. Kristina Flores Victor] 1:04

First week is going great. My students already, I don't know. I have a feeling about this semester. It's a really good group of students this semester.

[Prof. Monicka Tutschka] 1:11

Yeah, I'm excited to it. And they're ready. They are doing the reading. They are ready. Let's move on. Our guest for today is vice mayor and council member of District Six, Eric Guerra.

1:19

Eric was born in Barstow, California to farmworkers and he began picking fruit at the age of five, often for 12 hours a day. He put himself through college at State and through a master's degree at Sac State Stingers up. And while pursuing his education, Eric worked as a janitor, at Sac State, and sometimes slept in his car. And today, Eric Guerra is the vice mayor of the city of Sacramento and a city councilmember representing District Six.

1:47

District six is located to the south and to the east of Sac State. And it's roughly it has roughly 60 680,000 people, hardworking residents who are very diverse. Hello, Vice Mayor and Councilmember Eric Guerra. It's really great to have you on the podcast today.

[Vice Mayor Eric Guerra] 2:06

Well, thank you, Professor Tutschka. And good morning. And thanks to Professor Victor for your time here today. And feel free to call me Eric. You know, for those of us at Sac State, they've known me for many years as a student, as an alum and as a volunteer. And it's just great to be on this podcast, you know, talking today about this, I do have one clarification that was that was a great intro, but I was actually born in in the same adobe house that my mother was born in, in the mountains of Michoacan, Mexico.

2:37

And interestingly enough, we just got back from Mexico, where I took my son there and showed him, you know, the same house that I was born in, the same little room where my mother and half of my 76 first cousins were also born in. You know that to this day, that adobe house still only gets running water twice a week.

[Prof. Monicka Tutshcka] 3:01

Wow. Thank you so much for correcting that.

[Vice Mayor Eric Guerra] 3:07

Yeah, it was it's an interesting experience because, you know, I came in the eighties during a time when the economy in Mexico had tanked and, you know, famine was a real thing. You know, hunger was a real issue. And so like many the story of many folks, my mother, my brother and I were undocumented. My father had gotten his green card because my grandfather was part of the Bracero Program. But we had to come across the border. And interestingly enough, over the last administration, during the Trump era, watching some of those videos and footage, as of particularly the one with the father and the daughter in the river, brought back some challenging memories.

3:50

You know, my mother had to run across the border. And because we were young, my brother and I, my sister would be later born in Woodland, California. But my brother and I were put in

the back of a van and, you know, not knowing whether we would meet my mother on the other side or not. But we had to come across him as and fortunately, you know, we met my mother, but I can only imagine what she was going through and thinking about as she came across, would she make it over and not reunite with us.

4:22

Or maybe we would make it across and be in a country without any language or connection and her be caught by immigration and back but offer an opportunity.

[Prof. Monicka Tutschka] 4:37

Eric, what you just shared reminds me, and I hope it reminds all of the listeners about the need for comprehensive immigration reform and that no family should have to worry about being separated from one another as they seek opportunity and pursue the American dream. Kristina, I know you have a lot of great questions that you want to ask, and so I'm going to pass the mic over to you and take it away.

[Prof. Kristina Flores Victor] 5:00

Thank you so much, Monica. Eric, I do have a couple of questions for you about how our students here at Sac State and more broadly in the CSU can get involved in public service. And we think that as an alumni of the CSU system, you'll be uniquely qualified to answer these.

5:21

So, my first question is, you know, as many people in the greater Sacramento region might already know, you are a two-time alum of Sacramento State. I was hoping you could tell us a bit more about your time here at Sac State, and I think that your experiences have a lot of similarities to our students right now, taking courses, trying to finish their degrees, working, being first generation scholars. So, if you don't mind telling us a little bit about your experiences here.

[Vice Mayor Eric Guerra] 5:45

Of course, you know, proud to be, you know, a multi alum. I say I got my Bachelor's of Science in electrical and electronic engineering and then my master's in public policy and administration. But I also, you know, joke that I got my certificate here on campus, too. People ask, well, what was it in it? Was it education or teaching? And I said, no. As my marriage certificate, I met my wife in the master's program and she's an alum.

6:15

And so, yes, you know, we are we are big, big hornets in this household. But, you know, it's interesting because I wasn't planning on going to Sac State. In fact, I was a farm worker all my life and as a kid. And one thing that I only cared about was just getting out of poverty and trying to figure out a way. And so I was going to enlisting in the military, but it was the college assistant program at Sac State that found out that I was a seasonal farm worker and that I qualified based on my aptitude test for the military, for the minority engineering program.

6:57

But it gave me an opportunity to study engineering at SAC State, and I didn't even know what engineering was, frankly. They asked me what major I wanted to do, and I said, Well, what's a major? And they're like, well, the things you like to do, what do you like to do in high school? I'm like, well, you know, I like sports. You know, I, you know, I like shop. And they're like, well, that's engineering, you know, it's fixing things and making things and what okay, I'll do engineering, having no clue, you know, how hard it really could be?

7:25

And, you know, our family, like many still today, you know, and I try to go and speak to some of the farm working communities and help them learn about as well about opportunities there. They're just not as informed. If you grow up in a household where your parents went to UC or my wife went to NYU, you know, their parents went to another university. So, it became a daily conversation, you know. So, I am at that time in my undergrad, has given me a big perspective because I wasn't engaged. I worked a lot. I you know, when I first moved to Sacramento, I ended up living in my car. And then and then I like many students, I was a night janitor. I worked at night and, you know, did classes in the daytime. And my day, my, my world revolved basically around work, you know, in class.

8:16

But to your point, you know, getting involved, how does how do you do that? And I found time to get involved because I cared about particular issues affecting students. You know, when on campus I got involved when I felt that there wasn't enough funding for students who were wanting to do their senior engineering projects or compete. And I saw that a lot of money was going to, you know, barbecues and hot dogs and social stuff, which is great. I mean, I'm an advocate for student life, but I felt that there wasn't enough for that.

8:50

So on campus, I started advocating with a lot of us working students about, hey, we need support so that those of us who don't have the flexibility to do this stuff can do stuff. The other issue we found out, like many of us, we would walk from the light rail station to the campus before, you know, now you walk there and you see, you know, green striping and crosswalks and sidewalks.

9:11

There used to be no sidewalks between 65th Street light rail station to the campus, and there wasn't the tunnel. In fact, we would run across Folsom Boulevard and climb over the railroad tracks to get on campus. If we were to get there on time, if you had to walk or take the bus, which, you know, would get jammed up. But a number of us students went to city hall and we said, you know, we just need better lighting, better walking the essentials just to get to class. It doesn't take a lot. You don't have to join a club. You don't have to, you know, go out and do a major internship if you don't have the time.

9:47

But there are small ways to be involved that you can speak from a life experience that later on help you when you're looking for a career or a job. And so, one thing message that I would tell students is that you may be working a lot, but try to take a step back and find ways that that feel fulfilling for your engagement. What are the things that matter to you versus just trying to do

what I think many students do is fill their resume with the number of clubs, like ten clubs, but never really are engaged. So, figure out what is your passion and think about how that adds value and how it enriches you. Then when you go to an interview, you can articulate what you learned from there.

[Prof. Kristina Flores Victor] 10:31

That's great. I have a follow up for you on that. I do think that sometimes students feel like these extracurriculars need to be these very long experiences. Right. You know, like a semester long internship or a yearlong leadership position. But some of what you're saying seems to there seems to be this there can be these very short-term moments to right where going to city hall and advocating for better lighting and things like that. Do you think that even these kind of short term experiences later on help people in their careers and thinking about that step to that first job, that it's possible to have more of these kind of small moments and that they're still beneficial for a career later on?

[Vice Mayor Eric Guerra] 11:10

Definitely. It doesn't have to be a drawn-out internship or experience like I if you can, if you have the ability to and if you can tighten your belt as much as it's already tightened, I encourage you to do so. Because what those internship and experiences do create when you have length is it's relationships, and those relationships carry a long time. And like any relationship, whether it's with your family or a spouse or a loved one, it takes time to build that relationship. So there is a strong benefit to try to do that. So, I encourage you to, but for your career. And if you can't, what employers and what you know folks who are looking at and at students when they're interviewing is what were the critical thinking concepts that you took into place to achieve that?

12:03

And if it's as easy as, you know what we saw this problem. We organized five students, we drafted a letter and we sent it to them. And then we asked for a response. So, if you can do that and you can find ways to participate in things that show that you can accomplish a task without a lot of supervision, then that is a value to employers. Great.

[Prof. Kristina Flores Victor] 12:28

I have another question. It's somewhat related, but thinking about your experiences here at Sac State when you were a student and I myself an alum too, but from what you see in your office, from what you see kind of as a broader view of the region, how do you think that the experiences of students today are different than they were? You know, maybe ten years ago when we were on campus at that time or even 20 years ago. And I think I'm thinking specifically here about things like increasing cost of living or the increasing cost of tuition. So the challenges that students are facing today, how do you feel like they are perhaps different than when we were here at Sac State?

[Vice Mayor Eric Guerra] 13:04

I would say that they're different, but maybe I'll say in a way that they're more exacerbated. You know, I came from, you know, when my when I did my FAFSA, I think my parents combined income was 18,000 a year. I mean I mean, we were in poverty. So the issues that I faced as a as a freshman on campus are probably what a grand majority of students are facing now. So it's

not that it's new, but it's at a much larger, larger scale, and it's affecting more than just those at the very low income level. The middle-class families are facing that. You know, families whose parents did have an education and still can't provide and provide assistance for housing and or transportation are now at a much larger scale.

13:56

And because of the lack of actual construction of multifamily housing, rents in our region have increased. And also, you know, the way we planned our cities didn't make for the best public transportation. If you have to own a car, that's a payment. If not, it's insurance. Gas is maintenance. And if you are in an accident, then, you know, the cost could be even more so. So avoiding that liability is a is important, but it's difficult when you don't have public transportation. It's a challenge when you have a population that has to worry about how they're going to feed their kids as well as they're studying to provide better.

14:40

So, you know, I think the if you're a student listening is to say that many of us see that that's happening now. They are trying to make efforts to increase the amount of housing to look at how we fund more, you know, public transportation. The other thing that I hope our state lawmakers take into consideration is that we haven't fully funded our state university system. And because of it, you know, the lack of class availability and options, because we aren't funding more to address, to have more faculty members and ah, the loss of faculty members because we aren't paying our faculty members enough, you know that as well, we're losing quality faculty and so we don't have the class availability in the slots available to adjust to who our working families and the diversity of students.

15:31

So we're we have a number of major challenges at both the local, state and federal level. Now, as a student, what can you do? Speak up. Talk about your pain. Talk about your what you. What you hope to see your visions. Because if you don't think about what's going down the next 30 years or 40 years, then we'll make the same mistake as the chancellors, the Board of Trustees did and not putting light rail through the campus.

15:52

You know, they didn't think about what did that mean for a campus that's going to be a lot of working families in the future and instead they diverted it from the campus.

[Prof. Kristina Flores Victor] 16:04

Thank you. You brought back a lot of memories, maybe like repressed memories of college for me. One year I think we slept in a garage because that was all the housing we could afford. And another year we had mattresses on the floor with four of us sleeping in the same room.

[Vice Mayor Eric Guerra] 16:19

Well, yeah. And, you know, I mean, I remember also at the time this is before 8540 and the California Dream Act, you know, I was fortunate to get my green card before I graduated high school and got enrolled. Exactly. But a lot of the students that that worked in the fields with me and similar, you know, did it. And so they were sleeping, you know, on my couch and on the

floor as well. And having to take two busses from Woodland to, you know, to Sacramento. And, you know, it does you know, this conversation is bringing back, you know, some difficult memories. It's a positive memory, too, because, you know, when you have a bunch of people in one house and we're all learning to play guitar, we had a we had we had a fun time in the evening. It probably annoyed our neighbors. But, you know, but you know, those are interesting memories at my time on campus.

[Prof. Kristina Flores Victor] 17:15

Yeah. I have one more question for you. Many of our students and definitely including a lot of our first-generation scholars, they're very interested in careers in public service. You know, I think that's the benefit of us living in in the capital region. But as you mentioned earlier in the podcast, you know, they might not have parents or siblings in their family members who went to college or who did internships or who are currently holding positions similar to those that they would be seeking out in public service, working in the capital or city agencies. So knowing what you know now as a council member and vice mayor, what would be your advice to our undergrads as they are beginning to kind of seek out their careers in public service?

[Vice Mayor Eric Guerra] 17:57

Yeah, well, number one, don't be shy about reaching out to elected officials or people in leadership. Don't be shy about reaching out to the SACS data lab in my own office, and even when I was chief of staff in the legislature in the capital, I always had interns and I always had staffers. And even today my staff at, you know, at City Hall, who I rely on for the best advice are sacks state alums. But they started off by, you know, saying, hey, I'm interested in this.

18:29

And I said, well, come check it out. I mean, and even Sac State alums who wanted to try it out and found out this is not for me. You know, we help them connect them to alums and friends of ours that were in those professions. But I will say I there's a few programs that are that are underutilized sometimes by our own students and are from Sac State, the Sac Semester program that connects students with internships to the capital and also the capital, the California Center for California Studies, Capital Fellows Program.

18:58

I was a fellow in the Senate Fellowship Program, and you'll be surprised how many Sac State students don't even know that that program is from the campus and don't apply. Plus at the city we also have, you know, a city year and a lot of other programs that we can connect you that are service based. We're going to our programs to get connected. And then finally, I'll just say it's just important to know what your passion is, find out what your passion is, because once you find it in a lab, it doesn't matter if that's their expertise.

19:27

Once you can articulate what is it that you enjoy and would like to put your energy in, they'll help you get that right person to be a mentor.

[Prof. Kristina Flores Victor] 19:39

Thank you very much. We are going to take a quick break. And when we return, I will turn it over to Professor Tutschka, Monicka, to discuss policy and issues in the Sacramento region.

[Prof. Monicka Tutshcka] 19:44

Audience. This concludes part one of Christina and my conversation with Vice Mayor and City Council member of District Six, Eric Guerra. If you're a working-class student or a first-generation college student, I hope Eric's advice to you proves useful. And if you're an ally of working-class students like I am, I think Eric gave us a lot to chew on. We have a responsibility to make the state campus a place where working class students can thrive. And there are things we can do at the campus level, at the city level, and at the state level to make sure that happens.

20:35

In part two of our conversation with Vice Mayor and City Council Member of District six, Eric Guerra. We're going to be talking to Eric about economic development, especially in under the utilized areas, affordable housing. And homelessness. So don't go away. Just click to the next episode and our conversation will continue on the other side. But for now, thank you for listening.

21:07

We hope our ongoing conversations spark understandings, empathy and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all. And you just listen to the building just as podcast. The information contained in this podcast represents the views and opinions of the hosts and guests and does not necessarily represent the views and opinions of Sacramento State or CRISJ.

21:23

Outro Music Lyrics

No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Time for building justice, justice.