

LOCAL NEWS

CU Boulder alum, student group create exhibit, panel about 1994 CU Boulder ethnic studies protests



Mateo Manuel Vela stands near his exhibit “By Any Means We Deem Necessary: An Archival Exhibit of the 1994 Ethnic Studies Protests at CU Boulder” at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art on Wednesday. (Matthew Jonas/Staff Photographer)

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PUBLISHED: June 8, 2022 at 8:49 p.m. | UPDATED: June 8, 2022 at 9:02 p.m.



It's been almost 30 years since students from the University of Colorado Boulder joined forces to create a movement on campus that resulted in the founding of the Department of Ethnic Studies, and the significance of those events are considered equally important today.



Mateo Manuel Vela talks about his exhibit Wednesday at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. (Matthew Jonas/Staff Photographer)

A lot of positive changes stemmed from the protests, rallies and the six-day hunger strike on campus in 1994, said Mateo Manuel Vela, CU Boulder alum. But a lot of the issues that were present back then still exist today, he added.

“As I was studying about this movement, I realized a lot of these issues that we are talking about now have stayed the same throughout time,” Vela said.

To recognize the accomplishments of CU Boulder students then, while also using their activism to help fuel future efforts, Vela worked with CU Boulder student group UMAS y MECHA to put together an exhibit and panel about the 1994 ethnic studies protests on campus.

The free exhibit opened to the public Tuesday at the Boulder Museum Of Contemporary Art, 1750 13th St., and will be open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. through Sunday.

On Friday, Vela will moderate a panel about the 1994 ethnic studies protests that will include several feature speakers: CU Boulder alum Carlos Kareem Windham, Boulder County Commissioner Marta Loachamin, KGNU Community Radio station manager Tim Russo and CU Boulder alumna Monica Perez.



The “El movimiento sigue” sculpture is outside the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art on Wednesday. (Matthew Jonas/Staff Photographer)

The event is from 5 to 7:30 p.m. The panel will begin at 6:30 p.m. on the second floor of the Boulder Museum Of Contemporary Art.

Vela said his personal experiences on campus while attending CU Boulder brought him to study the 1994 movement and later write about it for his honors thesis. During his research, he learned the movement was not widely publicized or studied.

“I was really fascinated by this particular student movement because it was led by a multiracial group of students,” he said. “It wasn’t just like one student group by itself, but it was definitely a mix of different student groups.”

One of the students involved in the movement was Windham, who will speak Friday. He founded the Student Coalition for the Advancement of Ethnic Plurality and was in Polly McLean’s social action, leadership theory and practice course.

McLean said her class taught students skills like how to write press releases, but also helped them learn about activism.

“Carlos (Kareem Windham) was already an activist in high school,” she said. “What he got in my class was more of the educational activism part and the way it can produce change.”



Mateo Manuel Vela stands near his exhibit at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. "I was really fascinated by this particular student movement because it was led by a multiracial group of students," he said. (Matthew Jonas/Staff Photographer)

CU Boulder had separate programs such as African American studies, Chicano/Chicana studies, Asian American studies and Native American studies housed under the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race in America, but students wanted to have a formal degree program with the various studies combined.

Eventually, the students voices were heard and CU Boulder created the Department of Ethnic Studies in 1996.

Looking back on that time, McLean said she still questions why protests were necessary to create the department.

"We should never have had to have students go through the struggle to get a Department of Ethnic Studies legitimized," she said. "How many other departments have we had to do that with?"

Vela said he hopes the exhibit and panel can both inform people about the historic event and show them the connections between issues then — when a Chicano former CU Boulder sociology professor was denied tenure — and now — when a [Latina former engineering professor](#) was also denied tenure.

"We sort of forget some of these historical examples of when students were able to successfully organize change," Vela said. "I think it's important to look at those lessons and see what can we apply today and kind of adapt to fit our current political moment."

Livestreaming of the panel discussion will be on UMAS y MECHA's Facebook page at [facebook.com/umasymecha/](https://www.facebook.com/umasymecha/).

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