

Actor speaks against discrimination in Unity Day speech

By Roger Alvarado
Staff Writer

The idea that there is one race and that the term "race" is used as a "cultural determinant," much to society's detriment, echoed throughout Edward James Olmos' Unity Day keynote speech.

The renowned civil-rights activist and acclaimed actor launched Unity Day 2002 on Tuesday, Oct. 8 at the Student Center Theater before a crowd of 370 and others looking on via a live video feed in the Cavalla Room.

An extremely warm and animated Olmos addressed audience members in both English and Spanish while maintaining a frantic pace as he assailed America's racial prejudices and its tendency to malign minorities.

"I've never seen a person of color representing anything universal in scope," said Olmos. "There is no such thing as an African race, a Latin race, a Caucasian race or an Asian race."

"There's only one race and that's the human race, period. For 600 years we've used the word race as a cultural determinant, because it makes it easier to kill when you're a different race."

According to Olmos, one of the major flaws of American society is that it forces European history upon minority students while their own cultures are neglected or denigrated, which can only lead to hate and misunderstanding.

During an especially thought-provoking moment, he asked if anyone could "name a U.S. national hero you've studied anytime between the first and twelfth grade at least for five minutes once a year that is of Asian decent."

After a few minutes and an audience member's futile attempt, he emphatically replied, "You wonder why children of color have such a hard time in school."

Olmos believes American culture is too short-sighted and continues to perpetuate the problem.

"For the child's self esteem and self respect, how dumb of us is it to feed one vitamin to all our children?" asked Olmos. "Hate is a learned behavior and you reach it by teaching European studies from the first grade on. This makes these minority children feel alienated and they begin to hate people."

Olmos described his "long journey" from the streets of East Los Angeles to the glitz and glamour of Hollywood and how tough it was for a Mexican American to grow up in the US.

During a family outing to Texas in 1956 Olmos, his father and brother had been driving around for hours. At his request, his father finally pulled over so they could rest and go to the bathroom. Almost as soon as he had gotten out of the truck, his alarmed father called him back.

"He said 'get back in the truck,'"

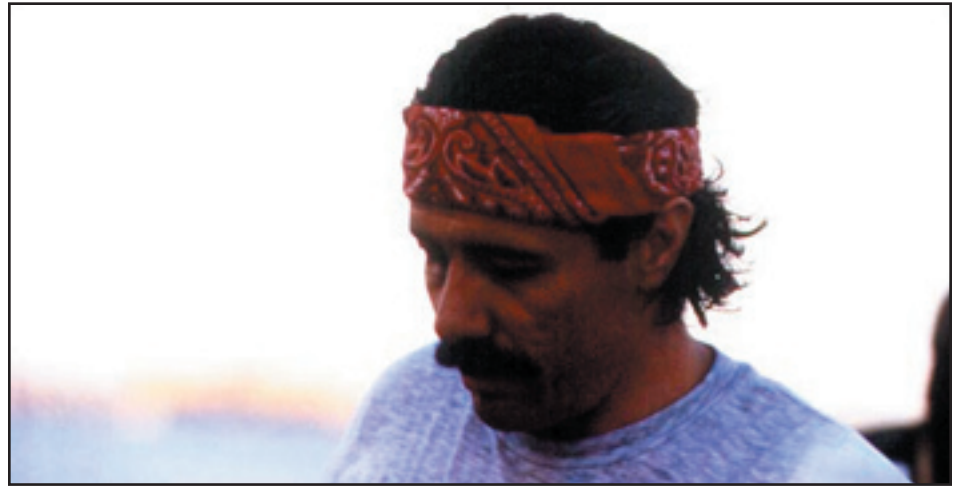


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PREACHING UNITY — Edward James Olmos featured here from the 1996 film *Caught*. The actor delivered a speech in the SC Theater pointing to the American education system as possibly being at fault for many prejudices.

said Olmos. "I said 'what's the matter?' and he replied 'didn't you read the sign?' It read no dogs or Mexicans allowed, blacks use the back door. We were used to it."

Earlier he told the story of how as a young struggling actor he was once asked to speak before students at Roosevelt High School in East Los Angeles, which had a 98 percent Hispanic student population.

Though feeling strangely awkward and struggling to connect with an ambivalent audience more interested in "waiting for the bell to ring," he succeeded in gradually winning them over and gave what would prove to be the

first of many of what he termed some of his "best performances."

Citing the altruistic examples set by Gandhi, Cesar Chavez, Jesus and Mother Theresa, he said, "You have to be able to give your life for others without asking for anything in return."

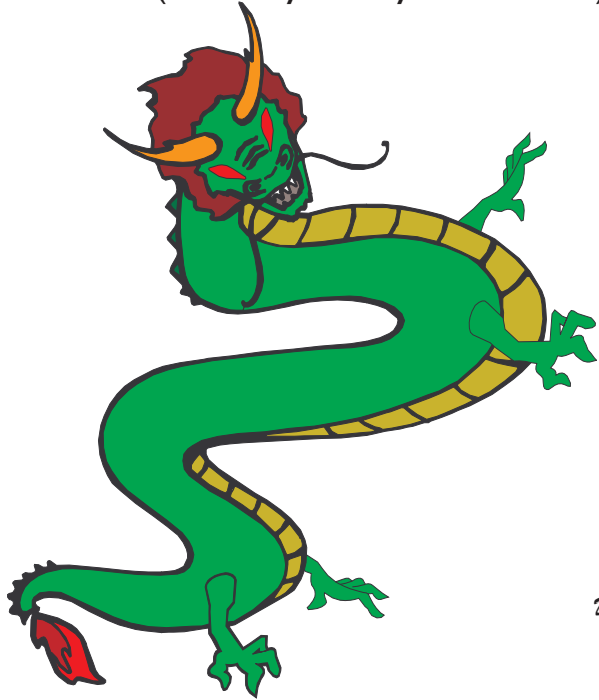
On a night when he captured the hearts and minds of his audience, perhaps the most unforgettably touching and poignant moment occurred when he singled out a nine-year-old African American girl in attendance.

"You are hope, I and we are wisdom," stated Olmos. "Wisdom without hope dies, so we need each other bad."

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