

Remembering Carlos  
Dan Fessler

I had the great privilege of serving as the doctoral dissertation advisor for Carlos (in recent years, he went by David) Navarrete. When he first came to UCLA, having completed his Masters degree at Cal State Fullerton, Carlos planned to become a primatologist. Studying primates in the field is very physically demanding, and, once he'd had a taste of this, Carlos decided it wasn't for him – he told me that he'd already had his share of physical hardship, and had no intention of spending his career enduring more of it. I was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time; we found common ground, and decided to work together.

It was clear to me from the beginning that Carlos had a unique combination of brains and bravery. Although science advances by challenging conventional wisdom, too often scientists defer to their more senior colleagues. Carlos was always willing to call out mistakes when he saw them, and to present alternative explanations that took the wind out of some bigshot's sails. (Indeed, for many years the signature line on his email included a quote from Thomas Jefferson -- "There is not a truth existing which I fear, or would wish unknown to the whole world."). At the time, Terror Management Theory was hugely popular in psychology. Carlos was very skeptical of the idea, and devoted much of his graduate research to disproving it. His doctoral dissertation was a first shot across the bow of Terror Management Theory, and, in the decades since, that approach has largely been disproven and abandoned.

Combined with his impish sense of humor, Carlos' willingness to criticize authority did not spare even his graduate advisors. I commuted to UCLA by bike, and, as a young Assistant Professor, money was tight, so I bought cheap bike shorts. One day Carlos gently suggested that I invest in some higher-quality bike shorts since, as he remarked, he could tell what religion I was.

As a graduate student, Carlos often served as a Teaching Assistant for our big undergraduate Introduction to Human Evolution course. In this class, the TAs show the students plaster models of fossil skulls from human-like species that came before us. Many people alive today have some DNA from the Neanderthals, one of the species that went extinct. Carlos always claimed that he had lots of Neanderthal DNA, and would proudly show the students his pointed canine teeth and large brow ridges – he liked to demonstrate that, unlike most people, he could balance a pencil above his eyebrows while looking straight ahead. Students loved him, and, unsurprisingly, he got rave reviews.

Always one to forge his own path, and deeply concerned about racial prejudice, toward the end of his graduate education Carlos decided that his future lay in the field of psychology. Entirely on his own initiative, he designed a new project with Professor James Sidanius, one of the world's experts on the psychology of racial prejudice, and earned a prestigious NSF Postdoctoral Fellowship to work with Sidanius at Harvard. This ultimately led to Carlos' position as a faculty member at Michigan State University, where he shaped generations of students, showing them how understanding the roots of prejudice can help create a more tolerant world.

Carlos' broad curiosity and dedication to combating hatred led to many, many collaborations with scholars around the world. I will be forever proud of the fifteen papers that we published together over the years, including a number on prejudice, as these serve as an enduring testament to the person that Carlos was. On the day that I learned of his passing, I spent time describing his research, his gumption, and his remarkable up-by-the-bootstraps success story with the young students in my lab. I will continue to do this, so that his career, and his life, may serve as an inspiration to others who, like Carlos, have brains and bravery, and can forge a path to achievement regardless of where they began in life.

I was lucky to have known Carlos, to have worked with him, to have laughed with him, and to have called him my friend.