Mr. Larios! Mr. Larios!
An educational migration from uncertainty to acclaim

By Kevin Miller | Photos by Hannah O’Leary
On a chilly January morning, in the hour or so before classes start at Salem’s Waldo Middle School, children arrive on foot or on bikes in twos and threes from the surrounding neighborhood. Parents headed for work drop off their kids in the pre-dawn darkness.

The students scurry in and grab prime sitting or standing spots in the warm, well-lit main hallway, where they wait for school to start. Many of them have arrived hungry and they head to the cafeteria for breakfast.

Nearly 60 years old, the single-story, sprawling building in a lower- and middle-income, heavily Hispanic/Latino area of Oregon’s capital city is named for pioneer Daniel Waldo, father-in-law of Clara Humason Waldo ’23(H), for whom Oregon State’s Waldo Hall is named.

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As students chat and study and wait for the start of the school day, attendance clerks and other support staff are already at work in the main office, where an oversized facsimile of a check for $25,000 is taped across some desks. It’s there to make sure no one forgets that not only is this the home of the Waldo Mustangs, it is the professional home of teacher Ricardo Larios, named in January by the Milken Foundation as Oregon’s outstanding educator.

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A 2005 OSU graduate in ethnic studies, Larios is the son of migrant farmworkers. He was the first member of his family born in the U.S. and the first to go to any kind of college when he started at Salem’s Chemeketa Community College. The Milken Educator Awards, more than 2,600 of which have been given across the nation since 1987, are presented in suspenseful, well-orchestrated assemblies that often draw TV news crews. Larios was this year’s only winner among Oregon’s 28,000 public school teachers, and video from the presentation makes it clear that he was stunned. Afterward, via iPhone, he had trouble convincing his wife Mayra of what had just happened.

“Honey,” he says in a video clip, “I won $25,000!” (There’s a pause as he listens.) “No, I’m not kidding. There’s a bunch of people here. Channel 2 ... I think I’m going to be on TV!”

A supremely confident teacher with a profoundly humble soul, Ricardo Larios says his decision to be an educator took its time to crystallize. Partly because of work he did at OSU with mentors like philosophy and ethnic studies professor Joseph Orosco, he has come to understand that his decision to seek an education and redefine himself had its roots in
and other teachers hold them back with good-natured banter and sometimes a friendly nudge. Many of the teachers, Larios included, clutch large cups of coffee as if it’s their life force. Lining the hallways, high on the walls just below the ceiling, are hundreds of wallet-sized photos of sixth-graders wearing sheepish grins and baggy, dark green graduation gowns. Principal Tricia Nelson, a 1986 Oregon State graduate in elementary education, explains that the gowns are what the students will wear in seven years when they graduate from McKay, the area’s high school. Pretty much everything Waldo does as a school, she says, including the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) college preparatory program led by Larios, is aimed at getting this mostly minority student body from homes of limited financial resources to see themselves as future high school graduates and college material. Students are taught to employ “As a teacher you hope your students will go on and do great things. It’s a profession of hope, in a lot of ways.”

Joseph Orosco, OSU philosophy and ethnic studies professor, mentor to Ricardo Larios
academic language when speaking in class, to take notes that would be the envy of many college students and to use complete sentences in their academic speech and writing.

In addition to leading the AVID program, Larios teaches social studies and helps with other efforts to get students to think about their futures and understand what they need to do to reach their goals. He has a program to encourage students to become teachers and he started a summer academy to help students transition from middle school to high school.

Nelson, in her sixth year at the school, notes that she tried to hire Larios away from Waldo more than once when she was principal of another Salem middle school, but she couldn’t get him to leave the students at the school. Now she knows why.

“He is always positive,” she says. “Even when he has to deliver bad news, he does it in a way that leaves possibilities. And when they do something well, he overpraises it. Children will do what you teach them to do. They will rise to higher expectations if you set them.”

It didn’t surprise her a bit that she detected no jealousy among his colleagues when the money and attention of the Milken award came his way.

“Every Wednesday he gives an award to one of the staff for something he’s seen or heard about that they’ve done. It’s just a sticky note on an old trophy, but he makes a big deal of it and it means a lot to people.”

Back in the hallway, students and teachers alike are tired of waiting. The bell sounds and the mass of young adolescents surges forward, released to their lockers and classrooms. Teachers hold their coffees and clipboards up and out of the way as they move with the flow of students as if they’re wading chest-deep in a river.

Larios makes his way toward his own room, continuously interrupted by “Mr. Larios! Mr. Larios!” as students seek his attention and he grants it with rapid-fire, focused questions and compliments.

Success is quickly celebrated as the constantly moving teacher keeps his students on task.
“New shirt?” he asks a boy. “I like it!” A girl, jostled by her schoolmates as the herd of middle schoolers moves down the hall, struggles to hold her open notebook up to him. AVID students learn the importance of staying organized, so binders are a big deal. Larios reaches over another student to flip through the proffered notebook, then nods his approval.

“Look at this new binder! Did you organize this? To do it like this you need to be a hard worker.” The girl beams. He wishes another student good luck in the day’s wrestling meet, reminds another that he has a quiz in the afternoon, asks another if she’s feeling better after being home with an illness. He has at least six more interactions with students during the 60-foot walk to his classroom.

Later, sitting on a bench near the office during a short break, he’s asked how he finds the energy to genuinely notice and respond to so many children. He starts to answer, then sees a boy on a hall pass walking with a strange gait, staying mostly on his heels.

“Why are you walking like that?” Larios asks. The boy seems a little embarrassed. “Oh, I get it,” Larios quickly adds. “New shoes, huh?” “Yes.” “Those are really nice,” Larios says, and the boy nods and smiles, continuing his careful walk to the bathroom as Larios explains: “You see, when some of the kids get new shoes, for a while they try to walk like that, without bending the front, so they don’t get any creases and they stay looking new.

“People need to be noticed. It’s a bad thing to be a kid and go a whole day without someone noticing you.”

Back in the classroom at the start of the day, it’s much more quiet and orderly as the students settle in, but the pace of Larios’ teaching never lets up. Another bell rings to mark the start of class, and there are school-wide announcements from the overhead speakers.

Next come updates and reminders from Larios.

“You’re going to take a test today,” he says, and pauses so they can respond with a predictable, exaggerated moan. “Ohhhh,” he says, his face contorted in mock, agonized sympathy. “You’ll be OK. It’s just a quiz. It’s easy.”

He immediately starts them in group discussions of a story they’ve been studying about polar explorers who must work together to survive because one is snow-blind and the other’s hands are useless because of frostbite. In previous sessions the students have role-played as the stricken men.

“How did it feel to only be able to use your words to get stuff done?” Larios asks. “What did you do that worked?

What could you have done better?” Slowly at first — it is the first class of the morning, after all — they focus on his questions as he circulates from group to group, sitting on their desks, kneeling beside them, encouraging, cajoling, sometimes pausing for a room-wide prompt.

“What happens when you don’t have all of your abilities and you have to get a job done?” Silence. “C’mon, we don’t have a lot of time.”

“It’s stressful,” says one student. “Yes! It is,” Larios responds as he keeps moving. “So what do you have to do? Give me more!” A boy leans back from his chair and quietly tells the teacher what he thinks the answer is.

“Yes!” Larios shouts, raising his hands as if signaling a touchdown. “Ding, ding, ding! Jose knows the answer.” Then, conspiratorially, to Jose: “Don’t tell them, though. Not yet.”

A few minutes later, assured that most of the groups are getting the point, he recaps, and as he does so he demonstrates his ability to seamlessly and simultaneously teach and manage potentially disruptive behavior:

“Hopefully what you’ve learned about cooperative tasks — stop making those
Noises — is that you have to rely on others when you don’t have all your skills available.”

He tells each group to collaborate on an informational poster with at least eight tips on how best to work together.

“I want your posters to be informative and colorful,” he says, then smiles. “And I want them to be cute!”

One boy repeatedly drifts away from his group, visiting friends at nearby desks. Larios motions him to sit down, then tells him, with a bit of a bite in his voice: “I have one free tip for you to use on how to work successfully in a group: Stay on task! OK? Can you just get to work?”

Most of Waldo’s students are bilingual, and Larios issues some of his firmer corrections in quick bursts of Spanish.

“There are just some things that I can say to them in Spanish in ways that reach them better,” he says later. “I can tell one of them to shut up in Spanish and just because of the way the language works, it isn’t as harsh as it would be in English.”

Orosco, one of the OSU professors Larios credits with helping him find his way, got to know Larios while leading OSU students on a trip to Mexico. It was Larios’ first visit to his parents’ original homeland, and both Orosco and Larios recall that the better he understood where his family story had begun, the more confident he became about where he might fit in back home in the U.S.

“He’s always been very good about noticing things,” Orosco says. “Ricardo has certainly accomplished a great deal. As a teacher you hope your students will go on and do great things.

“It’s a profession of hope, in a lot of ways.”

See a video of Larios receiving the Milken award in front of cheering students and colleagues at: bit.ly/ricardowins.

A drawing in his classroom provides insight into why his students and colleagues see Larios as a winner.