PRESIDENT

JOSEPH I. CASTRO

STUDENT SUCCESS IS TOP PRIORITY

by Eddie Hughes
It's the end of his first full week as Fresno State president. Dr. Joseph I. Castro and his wife, Mary, load into their new sand-colored Jeep Wrangler and leave campus at 6:15 a.m. for a day trip to Hanford — no GPS necessary.

Castro was born and raised in Hanford, a town of 55,000 people about 40 miles south of Fresno, making him the first San Joaquin Valley native — in fact, the first California native — to serve as president in Fresno State's 103-year history. He's also the first Latino president on the campus, which has a student body that is about one-third Latino.

“This is personal to me; it's not just professional,” Castro says. “To be able to come back home and be the president of the university in my home area, that's as special as it gets.”

Like many Fresno State students, Castro was the first in his family to graduate from college. At a press conference on Aug. 1, his first day on the job, Castro choked up with emotion when talking about inspiring Valley youth and showing them more opportunity.

“I had rehearsed that statement a couple of times, and I was emotional when I rehearsed it,” Castro says. “I could feel the importance of the day, the importance for young people to know that they can achieve their dreams. Because it was possible for me to achieve my dream, it could also be possible for a lot of young people here in the Valley, regardless of their family's income or the personal challenges they might be dealing with at home.”

Reflecting on that statement during his drive to Hanford, Castro's voice cracks slightly — he pauses to regain composure — and his passion for student success seeps out again. “I hope my appointment will help to inspire some young people around the Valley to achieve their dreams, to show that there aren't any ceilings on any young person, especially anyone from the Valley.”

**THE MOST IMPORTANT MEAL OF THE DAY**

The Castros pull into the driveway of a modest, well-kept home in a Hanford subdivision about 7 a.m. It’s where Castro's grandparents once lived and where his mother, Anne Marie Mendez, lives now. Castro grew up there with his mother and sister from seventh grade until he left for the University of California, Berkeley.

As he walks through the doorway, President Joseph I. Castro, Ph.D., becomes simply, “Joey.”

“He only gets the full name if he's in trouble,” Mary Castro says. “One of Anne Marie’s former coworkers said, 'He’s not President Castro, he's President Joey.'”

His mom and sister April Aquino greet him and Mary at the door. Childhood photos adorn the hallway wall, the refrigerator and a shelf in the living room. Castro recalls a passion for learning from his earliest days, a trait he shares with Mary. “I would spend whole days in the summer taking classes,” he says, “just because it was fun.”

Though his parents didn’t attend college, getting an education was stressed in his household. “My mom and my grandparents set that expectation early. Although they didn’t understand it all, they always talked about that being important for me.”

His father, a Korean War veteran, was a long-haul truck driver “with an extraordinarily strong work ethic,” says Castro, who describes him as a good man. “I was able to develop a relationship with him as an adult, and I was honored to be a pallbearer at his funeral in 2007.”

Castro’s mother has prepared one of her specialties for breakfast, chile verde, and asks how everyone wants their eggs cooked. But he tells his family to sit around the kitchen table as he prepares eggs for each person — over easy.
“Mom, you got rid of your table?” he asks, noticing his mother recently replaced the kitchen table he grew up with. His mother nods and sits there smiling, still getting used to the idea of her son being one of the most-recognizable faces in Hanford.

She knew her son was interviewing for the president position earlier this year and remembers a text message he sent her late in the process.

“Castro remembers his mother’s reaction: “Aye! A-y-e, exclamation point.” Then she shared the news with his sister, who remembers, “I was crying a lot too. I couldn’t speak for about 15 minutes.”

Mendez, a retired Hanford beautician, says she now gets frequent Fresno State news updates from people around town.

“My girlfriends are always telling me what’s going on, they’re always saying, ‘Did you hear about Joey with this and Joey with that?’” Mendez says. “I never had a computer or a tablet, so I finally bought me one and now I’m practicing.”

“Texted me and said, ‘It was very hard mom,’” Mendez says. “And then he called me 45 minutes later, that quick, and said he got it. He was crying, I was crying. It’s unbelievable really. I know it’s a big job, but he’s up for it.”

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“Before driving to Visalia, Castro and his wife stop for a quick cup of coffee and reminiscing at the Hanford Burger King. Still the same location, near downtown, but the orange tables they vividly remember are newer and more modern. It may have been remodeled, but this Burger King brings back fond memories. It’s where they first met.

Mary, then 17, was working to pay for her tuition and uniforms during her senior year of high school at nearby Riverdale Christian Academy. Castro had graduated from Hanford High School and was an 18-year-old freshman at UC Berkeley who needed to make some money during winter break.

The restaurant’s policy was that a male employee had to walk a female employee to her vehicle at the end of the night. Strategically, Mary says, Castro made sure his breaks came at the same time as hers so he could walk with her. Problem was, she had a boyfriend.

“After a few months where I heard she wasn’t dating him anymore,” Castro says, “then, I felt like I could make my move.”

The young woman behind the counter taking the Castros’ coffee order overhears the conversation and becomes curious. Castro, dressed in khaki slacks with a tucked in red Fresno State polo shirt, explains to the employee. “Hi, I’m Joe Castro,” he says. “I’m the new president at Fresno State, and my wife and I first met while working at this Burger King.”

A smile blossoms over the young woman’s face. She didn’t say it, but maybe — just maybe — she was thinking about her own future career possibilities.

The Castros walk out to their Jeep, holding hands. He drops off Mary at his mother’s house and drives to Visalia.
Now dressed in a navy blue suit, with a neatly pressed white shirt and a red tie covered with Fresno State Bulldogs, Castro returns to downtown Hanford after an hour-long meeting. Several folks recognize him outside the iconic Hanford Auditorium and walk up to introduce themselves.

Meanwhile, Castro notices a group of about 20 children in matching orange shirts having a picnic on the lawn. He’s on a tight schedule, but connecting with the children is his No. 1 priority. He walks up to the group with Mary and, one-by-one, they introduce themselves to each child and their accompanying chaperones on a field trip to Hanford’s Superior Dairy from Fresno.

"Are you the real president? Do you live in the White House?" one little girl asks.

Castro smiles and says, “Yes, I’m the real president of Fresno State. I do live in a white house, but it’s not the White House.

“I’ll tell you a secret.” Castro says. “I know the two best flavors of ice cream at Superior Dairy. One is peach, and they only have it in the summertime. The other is chocolate chip. They have the best chocolate chip anywhere.”

The president and his wife say goodbye and take a short walk to Superior Dairy, recently ranked by Yahoo! Travel as one of the top eight spots in the country to eat ice cream. As soon as they walk in, patrons throughout the shop recognize Castro, including some employees and one of his mother’s longtime friends.

Ernie Wing, whose wife Susan owns the shop with her brother, Tim Jones, approaches to shake Castro’s hand. Castro tells Wing how much he’s always loved the ice cream. Castro hands Wing his business card and invites his family to the president’s suite at Bulldog Stadium for a football game during the fall.

The Castros sit side-by-side in a pink cushioned booth and share a few bites of a chocolate chip sundae. The ice cream tastes just as good as Castro remembers, but he has to save his appetite for an important lunch meeting.

In rural Hanford, amidst a large, successful dairy, sits the log cabin-style home of George and Gloria Soares. The couple hosts a nearly three-hour lunch meeting with Castro and several of the area’s agricultural leaders. Fresno State is home to the Jordan College of Agricultural Sciences and Technology, and Castro wants to ignite more growth in the ag program.

“I want to identify areas where Fresno State can be an even greater place, have an even greater impact on the Valley,” Castro says. “Agriculture is certainly one of those areas. The challenges we face around education is another. Health is another. I’m thinking about how Fresno State can help to strengthen the Central Valley economy.”

Castro says meeting leaders in various industries, learning from them and sharing ideas is atop his to-do list. He wants to focus on how the university can support students to ensure they graduate in a timely manner.

Castro anticipates a major challenge he’ll face is ensuring the academic and athletic programs at Fresno State are financially sustainable over time. He knows community support plays a major role in how much the university can accomplish.

As Castro’s lunch meeting ends, Soares takes him on a tour. They talk about the future of Fresno State as they walk past Soares’ dairy cows while a tractor’s powerful engine roars nearby. It’s about 3:30 p.m. now and Castro’s shirt sleeves are rolled up as he follows the dirt path across the farm, listening intently to Soares.

The two men stop in front of a field of tall, green cornstalks, gently rustling in the breeze. They stare out at the corn field, joking about it being a “field of dreams.” For Castro, it’s a meaningful end to a day that has taken him full circle from his Valley childhood to president of Fresno State, representing everything young Valley students are capable of achieving — if they dream big.

After a full day in Hanford and Visalia, the Castros returned to the president’s on-campus office before heading to an introductory dinner meeting and social event with a prominent member of the Native American community. The Castros arrived home at University House around midnight.
**LUCY NUMBER AND WHY:**
since I am Fresno State’s eighth president.

**FAVORITE MEAL:**
Me-N-Ed’s pizza and a cold beer for a casual meal. Grilled fresh fish (halibut, sea bass or opakapaka) and a glass of Fresno State wine for special occasions. And plenty of fresh jalapeño peppers!

**FAVORITE VEHICLE AND WHY:**
Jeep Wrangler Safari because it reminds me of my driving adventures on vacation in Hawaii.

**IDEAL VACATION SPOT:**
Maui, because I love to swim and snorkel in the warm ocean water.

**BEST CHILDHOOD MEMORIES:**
Saturdays working on outdoor projects with my grandfather and long summer evening walks with my grandmother.

**FAVORITE PART OF LIVING AT UNIVERSITY HOUSE:**
The swimming pool.

**BEST PART OF YOUR FIRST FRESNO STATE FOOTBALL GAME AS PRESIDENT:**
The 47-yard field goal made by our freshman kicker Colin McGuire on his first-ever college attempt. It would have been good from at least 10 yards farther.

**FAVORITE ITEM AT GIBSON FARM MARKET:**
Ice cream!

**CONCERT YOU’D MOST LIKE TO SEE AT SAVE MART CENTER:**
Adele or Prince.

**AT LUNCH TIME ON CAMPUS, WE’RE MOST LIKELY TO FIND DR. CASTRO:**
At the Student Union eating lunch and visiting with students, faculty and staff.
Fresno State has a long history of university presidents who have been accessible to students, faculty, staff and alumni, but new President Joseph I. Castro entered uncharted connectivity the first day on the job when he asked people to join him on Twitter.

“I invite people to follow me on Twitter, and I usually follow those who follow me,” Castro says. “I think it helps to create that larger community.”

When Castro was announced on May 22 as the eighth president in Fresno State’s 103-year history, he began using Twitter to get acquainted with folks involved with the university. Castro is also using a feedback page at www.FresnoState.edu/president/feedback to engage with the public. His wife, Mary G. Castro, joined him in connecting with the community on Twitter. Her handle is @MGCastro5.

“Having that chance to at least connect through Twitter has been helpful, and it’s something that I want to continue to use in all the right ways,” Castro says.

Among his peers, Castro is in the forefront of using such technology. Only four of the 23 California State University presidents were using Twitter when Castro issued his invitation at a press conference. That day, he already had more than twice the followers of the other three CSU presidents.

It didn’t take long for people to notice. At a reception for educators and legislators, Assemblymember Henry T. Perea, D-Fresno, said Castro tweeted him a congratulatory message when his son was born in July — a month before Castro began as president.

Perea isn’t the only one communicating with the new president via Twitter. Take a look at some highlights straight from Castro’s Twitter profile.

— Eddie Hughes is a University Communications writer.