Growing up in Santa Maria, elementary school teacher Jaime Cuello (LS '93; MA, EDUC '98) didn't expect to wind up a role model, a mentor or an award-winning teacher. He was eager to finish high school and join the military.

Some chance encounters changed all that. Several people "popped into" his life and helped him, he says.

The first was Pedro Olvera, a counselor at Allan Hancock College. "I was a senior in high school; he was Mexican, like me. He was dark skinned, a big guy, wearing a suit. That impressed me. I decided I wanted to wear a suit, too," Cuello says.

The fourth of five children, Cuello was the first in his family to go to college. His parents are Mexican immigrants who never made it to fourth grade — the grade that Cuello teaches at Mary Buren Elementary School in Guadalupe.

A great deal goes on inside Cuello's classroom. He doesn't just teach the standard fourth-grade curriculum. He energizes, empowers and excites his students. The enthusiasm is plainly audible as the students await their next assignment.

"Algebra!" Cuello announces, turning to write a set of problems on the board. Surprisingly the statement is met with loud cheers. "Pick me! Pick me!" the students shout, hands waving frantically.

Algebra in the fourth grade? When you challenge students, he claims, it makes them accountable, makes them participate, creates enthusiasm.

Those are important traits to establish in children at a school like Mary Buren, where students typically might not consider college an option. Mary Buren is one of two schools in the Guadalupe Union School District. Both schools are designated a Title I school, meaning many families are below the poverty level, Cuello explains.

Rocky Pasche, a 10-year-old Vietnamese boy who barely spoke English when he arrived in the United States a year ago, says with conviction, "I'm going to UC Berkeley and become a doctor."

Rocky's college plans are not unique among Cuello's students. He lets them know college is accessible: "I know about the potholes, the obstacles. I try to educate people about leaping over the potholes, to keep moving forward."

In his classroom, college and university banners line the walls. Several students wear sweatshirts emblazoned with the name of their favorite college or university.

Cuello sometimes gives "college credit" instead of A's, B's and C's. Early in the academic year, students pick the college of their choice. When they complete an assignment, Cuello writes the name of that college in bold letters across the top of the paper. "Stanford is waiting for you!" he exclaims, encouraging them, letting them know a college education is within reach.
"He gives us a chance to express our dreams," says nine-year-old Iris Chavez.

His classroom is a place where students can also express who they are and learn about their heritage. Many of his students have no sense of pride in their own culture, so Cuello teaches them about their heritage, and by extension about themselves.

Cuello reaches out to students in unorthodox ways. He plays football with them; he and his wife take them out to dinner. "I give them time. I listen to Poly. In addition to all he does for his fourth-graders at Mary Buren, he also leads workshops on mentoring for aspiring teachers, giving them the tools to inspire future generations of children.

He urges future teachers to connect with their students. "First, we are listeners," he tells an audience of Cal Poly teacher education students. "Our job is to monitor, modify and adjust to each student's ability. We make sure everyone has an equal opportunity."

Great teachers must know themselves, Cuello instructs.

MENTORING IS A TWO-WAY STREET. "SOMETIMES I'M THE LISTENER."

But that's not enough. They must also know who their students are. Mentoring is a two-way street. "Sometimes I'm the listener."

Sue McBride, a professor in Cal Poly's College of Education, says that Cuello has earned a reputation as a dedicated, talented teacher. His students go on to high school, stay in school, and recognize the importance of Cuello's influence in their educational success. His students realize that he knocks himself out all week to make learning the most exciting thing in their lives, and then he spends weekends taking them to visit college campuses, McBride says. "They know they have a person of exceptional quality pulling for them."

Cuello, a published author and poet, was named the 2005 Honored Alumnus for Cal Poly's College of Education. He has been listed three times in Who's Who Among American Teachers, proof that his students hold him in high regard.

He says it takes about 10 years to reap the benefits of teaching. "I hope in the years to come, my students will come back and tell me they are going to college. My students are awesome. They are always craving more knowledge. Their eagerness allows me to go above and beyond with them."

Cuello believes becoming a teacher was his destiny. His mother must have suspected: she named him after her third-grade teacher.