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# Boy From The Barrio: David Alvarez And The Race To Be San Diego Mayor

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By [Sandhya Dirks](#)

In the soft light of dawn, a sleepy looking [David Alvarez](#) walks quickly out the front door of his Logan Heights home dressed in his signature dark suit. The suit seems a size too big on the 33 year-old councilman, perhaps because he always appears boyish, with round cheeks giving him something of a baby face.

## [Special Election](#)



His hair springs from his head — he hasn't yet had time to gel it down. "I just use whatever my wife has around" he says, taming his locks while jumping into an aide's car.

Alvarez is starting another long day of campaigning. First up are visits to several African American churches. A canceled debate the night before had given him a respite. "I held my daughter on my lap and we watched the Aztec's game" he said, cherishing time spent with his four year old. "She's a sports fan. I held her for an hour; we just lay on the couch, I haven't had a chance to do that for a while."

Alvarez has been going pretty much non-stop since he entered the [race for mayor](#). His challenge is a big one: Before he can even think about winning, he has to get San Diegans outside of his district just to know who he is.

"David Alvarez has a problem," La Mesa political scientist Carl Luna told me early on in the race. "When I talk with people about the election, they say, 'Alvarez who?'"

## So Who Is David Alvarez?

David Alvarez grew up in Barrio Logan, the thin, beleaguered strip of a neighborhood locked in between the port and the freeway. It is a mostly low-income Latino neighborhood, famous for Chicano Park, with vibrant murals painted on the underbelly of I-5 and the Coronado Bridge.

Alvarez is the son of a janitor and a fast-food worker, both immigrants from the Jalisco region of Mexico. He was the youngest of six kids, five brothers and one sister. With an eight-year difference between him and his next youngest sibling, he grew up like many first-generation Americans, handling adult tasks.

“I paid the bills for my family, helped them open up a checking account, I managed their finances from a really early age,” he said.

His brothers, he said, were involved in the gang culture of the 1980s. That scared him. After a brother once came home with his leg gushing blood, Alvarez vowed to choose a different path.

He was the first in his family to graduate from high school.



Courtesy of David Alvarez

David Alvarez, when he was attending San Diego State University.  
back home.

“That was a huge success in my family, it was a big deal. I remember we had this big party, and people were saying, so what are you going to do next? And I was like, I am going to do this college thing. And people were like, OK, good luck with it, whatever it is.”

Many in his family, Alvarez said, didn’t even know what college was. In fact, he barely knew what it was himself.

Alvarez entered as a math major, dreaming of being a teacher. But “when we got to calculus,” he said “I lost the love for math.” What he liked was the problem solving nature of algebra and geometry. He wanted to work in the community, maybe be a school counselor or social worker.

The budding community activist was a political novice when in 2003 he joined the Capitol Fellows Program in Sacramento, working on legislative affairs. He was happy in the role of policy work: “Policy is like problem solving, it goes back to my mathematics background.”

But Alvarez grew weary of the bubble in Sacramento. He missed San Diego. He turned down a job offer and came

## The Making of An Activist

Every politician has an origin story, a moment they cite again and again as sparking their political awakening.

Alvarez’s story goes like this: when he was 13, he attended a summer program for disadvantaged kids at UCSD. One day, the instructor took them on a field trip to demonstrate health hazards in low income communities.

Alvarez perked up as the bus pulled into his Barrio Logan neighborhood. It turned down his street and stopped at his front door, a house sandwiched between two metal plating shops, later found to be spewing toxic fumes.

“It’s kind of cool, because we are in my neighborhood ... until the teacher starts talking about the health

impacts: Kids suffering from asthma and all the negative impacts that come from that coexistence of industry and residential.”

Alvarez was terrified. And he remembers something else: Another kid on the bus said, “Why would anybody want to live here?”

It was like a shot through the heart. “That was the moment that was sort of, wow, I felt very ashamed that I did live there — it was almost like only people who are dumb enough to live here would live here. It was just very shameful.”

Just before the bus pulled away, Alvarez saw his mother walking up the sidewalk. “She was coming home with her apron and her visor, she was working at Burger King at the time.” He said he can picture it clearly even now, down to the logo on her visor.

Alvarez said after feeling an initial wave of shame he began to realize something was very wrong and the young man who questioned why people lived in Barrio Logan was right, “why would anyone allow this to exist — in any community?”

That moment, Alvarez said, changed him. “That’s sort of the first moment I decided to get involved with community activism and neighborhood activism. I actually never shared that story with my mom but it was one of those moments, where you just...” he paused, stumbling over his words. “It was a big impact in seeing how the world was different for different people,” he said.

Alvarez's mother died before he ever told her that story.

## **The Native Son and The Environmental Health Coalition**

Joining the class on the bus that day to talk about Barrio Logan was a member of the Environmental Health Coalition, an organization with which Alvarez has worked closely to fashion a controversial new community plan for the neighborhood.

Months before, I interviewed EHC activist Maria Moya. We were standing just outside of Chicano Park in front of the Mercado Apartments, a low income housing project. Moya told me a story about a councilmember she first met when he was just a young boy. The story didn’t click until I heard Alvarez tell his origin story; I realized I had heard it before.

Moya remembered a day when she boarded a stopped school bus to talk to some kids. “I was talking about master plating and all the pollutants, and all the people living next to it,” she said. “I was telling them it’s so polluting, it’s so poisonous, and then this kid raises his hand and says, ‘I live there’ and I felt so bad because I was scaring the heck out of him.”

That young boy, she said, was David Alvarez.

Alvarez said he doesn’t remember owning up to his home: he was too embarrassed.

But that’s how he got involved with the Environmental Health Coalition, or EHC.

“It was the EHC who were leading the charge,” he said. “So I started going to meetings, and I was the

youngest one there, and I really didn't know what I was doing, but I knew it was the right thing to do.”

Maria Moya said Alvarez has been a refreshing change as a councilmember. “He went through the struggles that people in this community went through. If anyone understands the community it's him.”

In Alvarez, Moya sees a quiet, contemplative man, a modest guy with a “big heart, someone that really, really cares.” He's different, “because we have been dealing with other Latino representatives in the city council that slap us in the face, don't care, all they want to do is advance themselves, and not the issues of the community. So having him there is totally a new day.”

That view is not universal. Where Moya sees modesty, longtime Chicano and community activist Rachel Ortiz sees standoffishness and even arrogance in Alvarez.

“People would call me up and say, you know what he told me, he said for 35 years we have been dumped on,” she said. But Ortiz said for 35 years the community has been fighting and making strides. “For 35 years we've cleaned this place up.”

## **Barrio Logan and the New Community Plan**

In his early time in City Hall, many saw Alvarez as a political outsider on the city council, voting his conscience and bucking the status quo. But passage of the [Barrio Logan community plan](#) shined a spotlight on his policies, especially because he was running for mayor.

While many, including the EHC and the Labor Council, paint him as standing up against the powerful maritime industry, others like Rachel Ortiz see him as selling out.

Community members wanted a version of the plan which would allow residential homes to be built in a buffer zone between the ports and the community. The maritime industry objected, claiming that would allow housing development to encroach on the port.

Alvarez brokered what he called a compromise deal that would keep both new residential and industrial building out of so-called buffer zone.

Ortiz was one of those who wanted low income housing in the buffer zone. Alvarez's compromise, she said, hung the community out to dry.



By Sandhya Dirks

Shipyard workers hold signs as maritime industry kicks off its campaign to overturn the Barrio Logan community plan, Oct 3, 2013.

She said he brokered a plan behind doors, checking in only with EHC and some industry leaders. “He rolled over, he should’ve stood fast for us. But unfortunately his ambition to be mayor overpowered any inclination, if he did have any inclination, to be for us,” Ortiz said.

Her distrust of Alvarez goes way back. When he ran for city council she supported his opponent, Felipe Hueso, the brother of Ben Hueso, who previously held the seat.

Her other disagreement with Alvarez concerns his support of housing for the homeless community on the edges of Barrio Logan. “Having them here is terrible for the community,” she said. “There are stabbings, and the smell ... you can smell it a mile off.”

She says the community has always been the city’s refuse bin for industrial waste and homeless people. According to her, Alvarez is selling out the very neighborhoods he claims he would put first.

Initially, Alvarez said one reason for his support of Barrio Logan’s winter homeless shelter comes from being homeless himself during part of his senior year of high school.

Ortiz said Alvarez is stretching the truth: “He wasn’t homeless, his family moved out of that house down to Shelltown, the next neighborhood right here. And then he went to college, and when you go to college you move in with in someone. Live out of a suitcase, that’s what college kids do.”

According to Alvarez, the house his family rented was sold during his senior year in high school. While his parents moved into a two-bedroom apartment with his sister and her family, he ended up crashing in a spare room at a family friend’s house. He admits he wasn’t homeless per se, but he did have to learn to live at the expense of others. The real lesson for him, he said, is that even with both his parents working full time, they couldn’t afford to buy a house in San Diego.

## Reawakening the Filner Coalition

To win this election, Alvarez may need the support of activists like Rachel Ortiz. She supported disgraced [Mayor Bob Filner](#). It is the so called Filner Coalition that can make or break Alvarez’s bid to challenge better known candidates, like his colleague, Republican [Kevin Faulconer](#), and the newly Democratic challenger [Nathan Fletcher](#).



By Sandhya Dirks

Kathleen Harmon, a key player in getting former mayor Bob Filner elected, takes councilman David Alvarez on a

tour of African American churches as he runs for mayor of San Diego.

Rachel Ortiz is supporting Fletcher, whom she believes would have listened to all sides in the Barrio Logan debate, although Fletcher has not been explicit about exactly what he would do to broker resolution.

Alvarez does have other longtime community activists on his side. Taking him on a tour of African American churches on Sunday morning was Kathleen Harmon, who helped mobilize voters to come out for Filner. As Harmon takes Alvarez from church to church, she introduces him to congregants and pastors alike as "San Diego's next mayor."

Alvarez is hopeful he can translate his grassroots campaigning into a spot in next year's probable run-off election.

"In a low turnout election, the best organized campaign will win," he said.

That isn't exactly true, according to UCSD political scientist Steve Erie.

"Low turnout elections favor the well-to-do, elderly, and those that represent the city's status quo." In other words, expect more conservatives to vote.

If Alvarez is going to have a chance against Fletcher, he is going to have to ignite a fever among African Americans, Latinos, immigrants and progressives, those living south of eight. So far, Fletcher leads in the polls.

## **After Mass**

On the campaign trail, Alvarez is a quiet but firm presence at events.

He seems to feel that if people got to know him, they would vote for him.

At Bayview Baptist Church, the pastor eventually got around to reading his name, praising the Lord for a councilmember being among the congregation. He had to mention Alvarez again, when he realized the councilmember was also running for mayor.

After a long morning of churches, we headed back to Alvarez's home in Logan Heights. Alvarez was going to duck in for a moment and hug his daughter, before heading off to the next event.

We passed by Christ the King, the catholic church that Alvarez grew up attending. He pointed out a statue on the front lawn. As long as he can remember, the statue has had no hands, "Vandals, I guess, chopped them off."

Rather than repair the statue, they put up a placard that reads, "I have no hands but yours."

"The community just adopted that as a motto," Alvarez said. It's one he has adopted as well.