

Famed teacher says 'believe in yourself!'

By Rob Cullivan
Staff Writer

ROCHESTER — Back in 1951, some administrators had doubts about Ljubomir Matulic's instructional ability at Instituto Normal Superior, a teachers' college in La Paz, Bolivia.

Thirteen of 17 students in Matulic's calculus class had dropped the course, and the teacher's superiors figured it was all his fault.

But one of his more studious pupils pinned the blame for the drop-out rate on the undisciplined habits of his peers — and he went to bat for Matulic when the teacher's position was threatened.

"I was very demanding," Matulic noted. "I maintained standards."

On Sunday, May 20, Matulic, now a physics professor at St. John Fisher College, had the pleasure of hearing his former student, Jaime Escalante, address the college's 1990 graduating class and give them the same message.

"If you expect kids to be losers, they will be losers," warned Escalante, a 59-year-old Bolivian immigrant who currently teaches calculus at James A. Garfield High School in East Los Angeles. Fisher conferred an honorary doctorate of humane letters on the educator.

As Matulic admitted, however, Escalante has developed an ability to retain failing pupils, a talent the older educator lacked in the years when Escalante was a student.

Teachers need to be utterly dedicated to their students, Escalante stressed in his speech, and he practices what he preaches.

Nowhere was his message more needed than at Garfield High, where he was hired in 1974. The high school, plagued by gang violence and a high drop-out rate, was in danger of losing its accreditation in the mid-1970s.

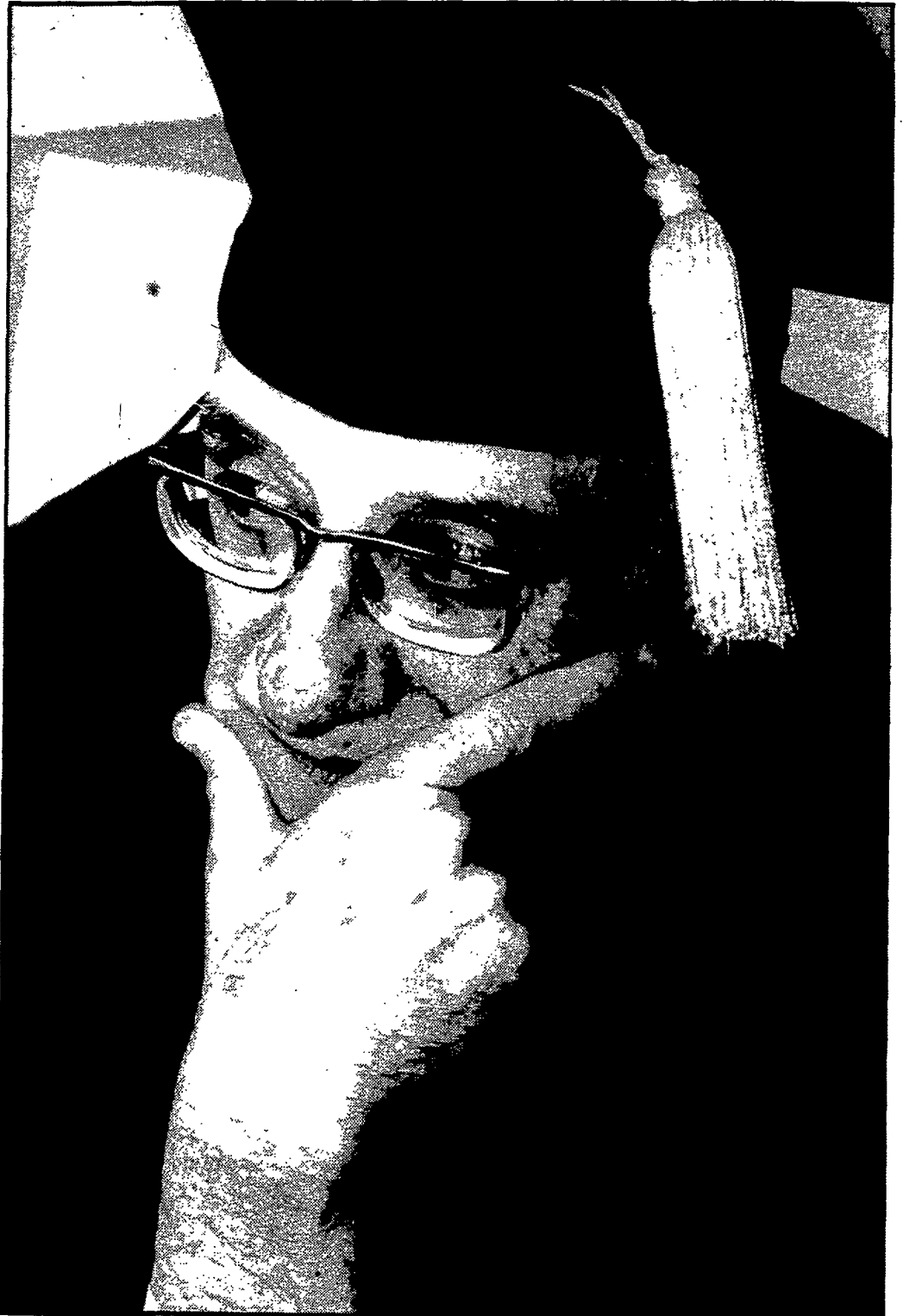
Yet, today, Garfield produces hundreds of the nation's best students. Each year scores of seniors emerge from an impoverished barrio, using the school's 17 Advanced Placement courses as springboards to enrollment in Ivy League universities and such schools as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of California in Los Angeles.

At the heart of Garfield's remarkable transformation was Escalante, who refused to believe that there was any such thing as a gifted or stupid student. Instead, all students are capable of educational excellence, he maintained, and skeptics are hard-pressed to dispute the teacher who will see more than 500 seniors, including dozens of his own, complete AP courses at the end of this year.

Escalante's AP calculus courses first became nationally known in 1982 after his AP students were suspected of cheating on their college credit exams. The students retook the test and passed with flying colors, securing Escalante's reputation as a radical reformer who could make "unteachable" students love to learn.

His classroom methods were detailed in Jay Mathews' 1988 book *Escalante — The best teacher in America*. One paragraph summed up much of his approach, according to Mathews:

"Demand more than (children) think



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

St. John Fisher College professor Ljubomir Matulic looks on during a press conference featuring his former and now-famous pupil, Jaime Escalante.



The L.A. ghetto high school where Jaime Escalante teaches math graduates some of the nation's best students thanks to his belief in their abilities.

they have to give. Spend every available moment convincing them they can do it if they simply make the effort ... Importantly, the door to (Escalante's) classroom was open to nearly everyone, even students with weak records.

"Escalante loathed tracking systems," Mathews explained — "(the method of) putting quick and slow students in different classes or barring students from courses unless they passed entrance tests."

Escalante's talent at illustrating complex mathematical concepts for his students came through in numerous scenes from the 1987 movie *Stand and Deliver*, in which former "Miami Vice" actor James Edward Almos starred as Escalante.

In an early scene, Almos' Escalante piques his students' interest in calculating percentages by placing apples on each kid's desk and slicing them with a meat cleaver.

At Fisher on Sunday, Escalante recalled how that scene came to be included in the movie. The movie's director asked his former students about their teacher's style and one recalled the apple story. As the movie showed, the student also depicted another student's response to Escalante's queries about percentages. "The kid ... ate the apple to avoid answering the question," Escalante said with a laugh.

Following his success in 1982, the teacher's example has spread throughout the school, inspiring the establishment of AP courses in other subjects. The teacher claims he is not gifted, except in the ability to give individual attention to each of his students.

"Every time I talk about my kids, I feel great because I see these kids in the best colleges in the nation," he told the Fisher seniors. The secret to motivating inner-city teenagers to excel lies in believing in their abilities regardless of their background, he commented.

Following his address, Escalante told reporters that he now "deceives" his freshman students into believing they are geniuses on a regular basis. His "lies" range from telling poor learners he has calculated that they have an IQ of 200 to placing slower students at the head of study groups to bolster their self-esteem.

The teacher admitted his "lies" wouldn't work with older, wiser students, but by the time they reach their junior year, most of his math pupils are sure they can succeed anyway.

Escalante insisted that other teachers can adopt his methods, but he noted that his fame and success have not made friends and admirers of all of his colleagues. He commented that the math faculty had just voted him out of his department chairmanship at Garfield.

"We're not going to do what you do," Escalante said the teachers told him. "You help the students but you don't help us." On occasion, the famous teacher has alienated other teachers by demanding that they live up to his standards, he acknowledged, adding that the national attention created by *Stand and Deliver* added to the problem.

Despite the criticisms and setbacks, Escalante seems, as Mathews described him, single-minded in his determination to educate every poor and minority child who comes his way. His achievements are even more impressive when one realizes that more than a quarter of the Mexican-American college calculus majors in 1988 graduated from Garfield.

As Escalante jokingly pointed out in his speech at Fisher, associating with him or the principles he espouses apparently leads to success.

"In the last presidential election in California," he said, "George Bush mentioned my name, and he became president."