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Author and Poet Jimmy Santiago Baca to Receive Luis Leal Literature Award

Jimmy Santiago Baca could easily have pursued a life of crime. Sentenced as a young man to five years in a maximum-security prison, he was well on his way. While incarcerated, however, Baca learned to read and write, and found he had a passion for poetry. After serving his time, he chose to leave prison not as a hardened criminal, but as a new writer.

Now an award-winning poet, novelist, and essayist, Baca is the recipient of UC Santa Barbara's 2010 Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature. The award, which is co-sponsored by the Santa Barbara Book Council, will be presented at a ceremony at 4 p.m. on Thursday, October 28, in the campus's Corwin Pavilion. The event is free and open to the public.

Born in New Mexico of Indio-Mexican descent, Baca is the recipient of several awards and honors, including the Pushcart Prize, the American Book Award for Poetry, the International Hispanic Heritage Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and the International Prize, which he received for his novel, "A Place to Stand." He has held a Regents Chair at UC Berkeley, The Wallace Stevens Endowed Chair at Yale University, and The Endowed Hulbert Chair at Colorado College.

"From the time I starting writing 32 years ago, Mr. Leal was my inspiration," Baca said of the scholar for whom the award is named. "I aspired to follow his model in scholarship, compassion, creativity, and commitment, but I soon realized few can do so. He stands alone. It is such a great privilege and honor to receive the Luis Leal Award and brings at least one of my dreams full circle -- that my name would be associated with his one day."

Baca jump-started his writing career in the late 1970's by sending three poems -- from prison -- to Denise Levertov, a poet herself, and the poetry editor at that time for Mother Jones magazine. His work was published in the magazine and later appeared in a volume titled "Immigrants in Our Own Land," which came out in 1979 -- the year he was released. He earned his general education diploma (GED) a few months later, and then went on to the University of New Mexico, where he completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. In 2003, he received an honorary doctorate in literature from the same university.

"Jimmy Santiago Baca is a voice of Chicano survival in a country that has too often marginalized Chicanos and other Latinos," said Mario T. García, professor of Chicana and Chicano Studies and of history at UCSB. García is also the organizer of the Leal award.

The author of more than 11 volumes of poetry and three novels, Baca has been a guest on several radio and television programs, including National Public Radio's All Things Considered, Good Morning America, Language of Life with Bill Moyers, and CBS Sunday Morning.

Devoted not only to his craft but to teaching others who are overcoming hardship, Baca established Cedar Tree Inc., a nonprofit foundation in New Mexico that conducts literary workshops in prisons and detention centers, and at community centers and schools for at-risk youth. The organization's mission is to provide underserved communities with the tools necessary to overcome obstacles to learning.

In 2006, Baca received the Cornelius P. Turner Award, a national honor presented annually to a GED graduate who has made outstanding contributions to society in the areas of education, justice, health, public service, and social welfare.

The Leal Award is named in honor of Luis Leal, professor emeritus of Chicana and Chicano Studies at UCSB, who was internationally recognized as a leading scholar of

Chicano and Latino literature. Previous recipients of the award include Graciela Limón, Pat Mora, Alejandro Morales, Helena Maria Viramontes, Oscar Hijuelos, Rudolfo Anaya, and Denise Chávez. Luis Leal died in January of this year at the age of 102.

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