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Children play as part of a mobile health program. Photo by Stephen Weissbart

## Rolling in Fitness

### Grad Student's Mobile Program Promotes Health and Exercise

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May 18, 2010  
By Mimi Ko Cruz

As Alejandro Espinoza (B.S. kinesiology '06) eyed the kids chasing after an ice cream truck, he wondered if a similar truck could bring fitness equipment and exercise instructors instead of sugary treats.

In relatively short order Espinoza, who expects to receive his master of public health degree this month, consulted his professor, Lenny Wiersma, researched Orange County kids and obesity and created the "Mobile Physical Activity Unit" — a bus owned by [Latino Health Access](#), where Espinoza works as the chronic diseases program coordinator.

Espinoza has been driving the bus to the lot of St. Joseph's Church in Santa Ana every Wednesday evening and Saturday morning since April 21. Studies show that St. Joseph's neighborhood has the fewest parks or open spaces in the city.

Bringing the bus to the church gives area children a chance to run and play in a safe and supervised atmosphere, Espinoza said. And, the noncompetitive sports and team games he and fellow Cal State Fullerton students deliver also build hand-eye coordination and motor skills, and 27 area children and their parents learn about the importance of exercise and making healthy choices.

Mayra Torres smiled as she watched her children play a parachute game, grateful now that they have a safe place to play. She used to let them kick a ball in an alley behind their apartment complex until last November, when her 10-year-old son got run over by a car.

“His feet were fractured, and I didn’t let my kids go outside to play after that,” Torres said. “But, here, they’re safe and they really look forward to coming.”

Her 8-year-old son, Rudy, called the program “cool,” adding that it beats staying indoors watching TV and becoming overweight.

That is the point of the program, Espinoza said. It also is his final project in the Master of Public Health Program, although plans call for continuing the twice weekly regimen indefinitely through a partnership between Cal State Fullerton and Latino Health Access.

“This project is raising awareness that the wrong environment can be a precursor to disease, like childhood obesity,” Espinoza said. “I’m very fortunate to be able to work with my community and be able to give



Alejandro

Espinoza created the mobile fitness program as his anti-obesity M.P.H. final project. Photo by Stephen Weissbart

## Alejandro Espinoza

**Age:** 31

**Residence:** Tustin

**Degrees:** M.P.H., expected May, 2010; B.S. kinesiology 2006, both from [Cal State Fullerton](#)

**Mentors:** [Shari McMahan](#) and [Lenny Wiersma](#), Cal State Fullerton faculty members, and [America Bracho](#), founder of Latino Health Access, a nonprofit organization that addresses the health needs of Latinos in Orange County

**Future:** “I plan to continue to work with Latino Health Access, advocating for underserved communities well after I graduate with my M.P.H. degree. I feel that Latino Health Access is a great organization to work for and plan to stay there for a long time to come because it allows me to work at a grass-roots level and interact with my Latino community and hear their needs and concerns and, in turn, I’m able to directly address those needs and concerns.”

children the outlet to be healthy and active.”

The project is being funded by a \$1,500 grant from the Centers for Disease Control and a \$2,000 donation from Latino Health Access. Parents are being surveyed to assess the project's impact in preventing obesity and promoting healthy lifestyles, Espinoza said.

“This program is needed in this community,” Espinoza said. “Kids around here play unsupervised in dumpsters and in the streets, where they get hurt. There are no parks nearby, so this project fills that void.”

Espinoza's project “is the perfect example of seeing an obvious need in society and applying a creative, cost-effective solution to a problem,” said Wiersma, associate professor of kinesiology and director of the university's Center for the Advancement of Responsible Youth Sport.

His project could serve as a model for similar efforts in communities nationwide, said Shari McMahan, chair and professor of health science.

“The parents are so appreciative, and are committed to seeing their children develop positively despite the challenges and barriers they face,” Wiersma said. “Alex has a commitment to his community that few students have. He is applying all of his skills, education and personal experiences in a way that immediately benefits society. His future is limitless.”

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Alejandro Espinoza, right, with his mentors Lenny Wiersma, left, and Shari McMahan. Photo by Stephen Weissbart

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