

## LOS ANGELES

# South L.A. Native Kicks Off Grassroots City Council Run

First CEO, then community activist. Next stop: City Council?

**By: Rachel Cohrs**

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When Jorge Nuño renovated a mansion in South Los Angeles and opened up a space for local kids to go after school, the community couldn't quite believe it.

Rumors circulated that he had money to buy the house because he was a big-time drug dealer.

When police cars came over to the house, whispers started that he had the cops in his back pocket.

When Nuño bought small skateboard ramps and an Xbox for the kids to use, one neighborhood mother was concerned that there were some kind of "Michael Jackson shenanigans" going on.

It took some convincing, but they eventually accepted that Nuño is a well-intentioned, familiar face forging an unfamiliar path. Nuño, 39, has lived in South L.A. his entire life. By age 29, he had built a successful Hollywood graphic design career that would have allowed him to, in his words, "get out of the hood." But when he decided to start his own business, he made the unusual choice to base it in South L.A. Nuño's purchase of the Big House ignited his passion to serve local youth and prompted his newest endeavor: running for a Los Angeles City Council seat in 2017 against incumbent Curren Price.

"Jorge has built relationships that last over time," said Vanessa Vela-Lovelace, a program director for the local nonprofit CDTech. "In a disadvantaged community, that's something that really matters in long run."

The Big House is Nuño's own universe nestled on East 35<sup>th</sup> Street. It contains, among other things, his living space, graphic design business, youth-centered nonprofit and new campaign headquarters.

Outside on the front porch after school, middle and high school kids lounge in rumpled uniform polos, their backpacks tossed to the side. One boy nonchalantly leans against the railing, his arm draped around a girl hovering next to him. A few others mill around, idly bantering about lunchroom gossip and the travesties of homework.

Every now and then, a spurt of laughter breaks out from the group, interrupting the steady rhythm of a dribbling basketball coming from around the back. A group of boys shoot hoops in the driveway, carefully aiming to avoid the broken backboard.

When Nuño walked over to open the garage door, one of the boys eagerly asked if he and the others could fix the backboard.

"If you put together a plan, we can talk about it," Nuño said with a grin.

Nuño and others affectionately refer to these young people as the "Nuevo South kids," or the neighborhood students that participate in programs through Nuño's nonprofit of the same name.

Nuevo South encourages kids to explore technology and entrepreneurship. The Nuevo South staff host programs including workshops for coding, photography and graphic design, music industry sessions with Grammy-winning producers, and incubators to help students develop business plans.

The Big House was originally intended to be a home and company office for Nuño. However, after realizing how much space went unused, he decided to open his doors to the kids he could see playing outside his windows. The resulting interactions with the students were the beginnings of Nuevo South.

## A Tour of Jorge Nuño's Home Base, The Big House



Sylvia Garza is 19-year-old college student and cousin-in-law of Nuño's who was a Nuevo South kid herself. She helped renovate the Big House during the summers as a child.

"Ever since I can remember, Jorge is such a people person. He genuinely cares about everyone," Garza said. "No matter what I'm going through, no matter what these kids are going through, he will have an open door, an open space, and an open mind to help you to the right path."

Upstairs, a couple of young graphic designers focus intently on enormous computer screens. The monitors are mounted on narrow, trendy wooden desks around the perimeter of the room. The designers perch on metal stools and lean forward as their fingers flit nimbly over keyboards and trackpads. Their cursors dart across the screen, ensuring every pixel in each intricate, complex design is exactly in place.

They work for Nuño's company, NTS Communications. Nuño built the business from scratch out of his living room 19 years ago. The NTS team produces comprehensive marketing materials including posters, movie trailers, flyers, photos and videos for clients. NTS has worked with brands including ESPN, Universal Pictures, Walmart, Red Box, Lionsgate, the NFL, and the A&E Network. The halls of the Big House are lined with dozens of movie posters the team has worked on.

Just as Nuño's love for the South L.A. community crept into the Big House, it has similarly made its way into his business. Nuño has recently leveraged his skills to recruit talented students to stay South L.A. public schools.

"[The students] don't want to come back. They want to be out of the hood. But we can't keep losing our talent to other communities," Nuño said.

Santee Education Complex, a public high school, opened with riots nine years ago and couldn't quite shake its bad image. Santee faced a six-year enrollment decline when Principal Martin Gomez reached out for Nuño's help.

On a walk around Santee with Gomez, evidence of Nuño's marketing marks every visible surface. Upon crossing through the gates to enter the main courtyard area, the concrete path is lined with slick banners highlighting college bound Santee students. A sticker depicting the redesigned Hunger Games-inspired logo is crookedly stuck to the principal's door. A shadowy, dramatic poster featuring Santee athletes occupies a prominent spot behind Gomez's desk.

The marketing push appears to have helped; Santee's enrollment has markedly increased in both of the two years since the NTS partnership began. Last year Santee enrolled 545 new freshmen, and this year over 600. Work with public schools now makes up between 30 and 40 percent of Nuño's business.

Gomez acknowledged that something deeper than enrollment numbers changed during the campaign.

"You would be amazed," Gomez said. "You think the banners and the materials themselves are exciting, but for the kids to see themselves on printed paper, it builds so much school pride."

The fusion between his commercial business and the community has organically led to Nuño's next step: a run for city council. One Tuesday afternoon, Nuño, his treasurer, Garza, his campaign manager, and a consultant gather in a comfortable conference room in the Big House for a campaign meeting. They sink into mustard-colored rolling chairs around a sturdy table. Nuño munches on a mango, and Garza, his treasurer, finishes up an order of fries left over from lunch.

"I want to live in a community where people aren't coming together over funerals, where we aren't talking about who just got arrested or beat down by the police, or that a drunk driver ran into some cars a few streets over last night," Nuño said.

The team is operating under no delusions about the long campaign trail that lies ahead. With no elected experience, Nuño is a nontraditional candidate.

However, that doesn't mean Nuño is a newcomer to politics. Early in his community building efforts with Nuevo South, Nuño made political mistakes by not inviting certain city officials to his events.

"I didn't kiss rings, and I was not looking around trying to get permission," Nuño said in a separate interview. "I was throwing a block party and my community was happy. That's who mattered to me."

Grassroots community organizers were originally the ones that suggested the idea of a run for office.

"I said I would be interested, when I'm ready," Nuño said. "After working with my community for 10 years and my company for 19, I'm ready for something different."

Nuño will be challenging the seasoned incumbent Curren Price, who is a graduate of Stanford University, holds a law degree, and has years of public service experience. Representatives from Price's office confirmed his pursuit of a re-election campaign in 2017.

Price has the advantage with traditional fundraising and voter activation avenues, so Nuño will depend on grassroots organizing. He will have to activate young voters who haven't previously been engaged in politics and tap into underutilized local funding sources to have a shot at winning.

"If we play his game, we will lose," Nuño's campaign consultant frankly advised.

George, 7, and Bruce, 8, Nuño's children, meandered in and out of the room carrying their after-school snacks towards the end of the discussion.

If elected, Nuño intends to put the interests of South L.A. before the interests of the city as a whole.

"We have to work like a village, and not keep fighting over crumbs," Nuño said, shaking his head. "I want to bring everyone together to leverage the resources towards one common goal: improving the quality of life in South L.A."

After the meeting, Nuño had settled the main issues he wants to work on: increasing equal opportunities in education, emphasizing public safety, addressing the lack of affordable housing and giving small businesses the resources they need to succeed. Now he is focusing on the transition from listening to the community's concerns to representing their voices.

Later that week Nuño joined community members on the steps of City Hall to draw attention to the affordable housing crisis in South L.A. Around 40 sweaty activists gathered on a humid afternoon wearing white t-shirts emblazoned with "I AM A RENTER." They chanted, pumped their fists, and shared stories for a horde of television cameras before a city council hearing that afternoon on affordable housing.

While Nuño is a homeowner, the affordable housing crisis became real for him when one of the Nuevo South kids ended up homeless. The boy's family was evicted from their home after their rent increased. He was sleeping on a hardwood floor and trying to commute nearly an hour to avoid switching high schools.

Nuño took the student in to live with him and his sons in their already cramped room on the third floor of the Big House.

"When something happens to your neighbor, it affects all of us," Nuño said.

In order for Nuño to have the chance to represent his neighbors, he has to win the election first. He's starting early with his campaign; the vote isn't until March 2017. The first step necessary to officially kick off the campaign in early April was for Nuño's team to file the paperwork to run.

They huddled in the lobby of an office on an obscure upper floor of City Hall, muttering and trying to figure out how to fill in the final details.

While Nuño finished the substantial stack of paperwork, his campaign manager sat across the room hunched in a chair, flipping through every one of the numerous campaign finance brochures in the room. Every now and then, he repeated a noteworthy tidbit out loud.

### Jorge Nuño Formalizes Campaign by Signing Paperwork at City Hall



Finally, Nuño had handed over the thick sheaf of forms to a waiting city official. As soon as he exhaled a sigh of relief, a city official emerged and reminded them that he had to choose a campaign email address. Nuño pulled out a manila folder and frantically jotted down ideas.

"What should we do? Jorge Nuño For Council? Jorge Nuño for CD 9?" his campaign manager mused.

"I think that might be too long. It should be something short so people don't have to type too much," Nuño returned.

"Maybe we don't need the first name. There's nobody else running with the name Nuño, right?" his campaign manager replied.

They eventually settled on [jorge.nuno@nunoforcouncil.com](mailto:jorge.nuno@nunoforcouncil.com), turned in the papers for the final time, and took a celebratory photo. They strode out the marble doors with a giddy bounce in their steps.

Outside on the staircase, Nuño took a deep breath and glanced back at the building he dreams of working in.

"I don't think it's going to get any more real than this," he said. "Today was a really big moment for me. When you commit to something it's not just about yourself, you're committing to the community."

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