



Manny Raya gets ready to paddle out at Rincon.

Outside the Cave

Gangster-turned-philosophy-professor Manny Raya discovered a big world beyond his 'hood

By Karen Pelland, Oct 2, 2013

On a sunny afternoon in early September, about 30 young men and women from varying backgrounds pack Room 201 in the interdisciplinary studies building at Santa Barbara City College. They are here for Philosophy 111: Critical Thinking & Writing in Philosophy.

An open set of second-story windows offers scant relief from the stifling mid-day heat. Any inclination toward a quick siesta, though, disappears as soon as Professor Manny Raya, 32, strides into class with a backpack slung over his shoulder and shades hanging off the back of his head. Raya's summertime attire of sneakers and board shorts has surrendered to hard shoes, dark slacks, dress shirt, pinstriped vest and loosely knotted tie. He has a full, closely cropped beard.

"So what's going on in the world?" Raya asks. "What'd you do over the holiday weekend?"

"My girlfriend came to town from San Diego, and we had a great weekend," a young woman in the back of the class says.

"That sounds awesome," says Raya.

"I did my chemistry homework," a boy in the front row adds.

“That sucks,” Raya replies. “Unless you really like chemistry.”

Polite laughter.

“Syria!” one guy says.

Raya jumps at the opportunity to get topical. “It seems to be the case that Syria allegedly used chemical weapons against its own people,” he says, and then ticks off details about U.N. resolutions, sanctions, military strikes, rebels, reactions from Iran, China and Russia, not to mention revelations from a Senate hearing. “Turns out it’s like the 13th or 14th time Syria’s done this! So why would we attack now?”

Raya, who has a passion for boxing—he’s president of Primo Boxing Club’s board of directors and was instrumental in raising funds to keep the iconic Eastside gym and its Say Yes to Kids program operating—paces back and forth in front of the blackboard. Up till now, he’s been feinting, jabbing and setting up his students for the power punch.

“So who the fuck are we?! What do we believe in? Why do we believe these things? Is the media telling us the truth? How is it that we come to know anything?”

Lesson plans on 17th century French philosophers are a future consideration on this late May afternoon as Manny Raya undresses in the parking lot of Rincon Del Mar, the storied surf break where Santa Barbara and Ventura counties meet. Before his wetsuit renders him a study in black, Raya displays a heavily tattooed torso, the centerpiece of which is a gothic script high on his back reading West Bruta, signifying his old Westside neighborhood. Below that is an impressive rendition of the Curly Bridge, a footbridge that links West Anapamu Street on either side of the 101 Freeway. In the foreground, a clown points a large handgun.

“He’s got my back,” Raya jokes.

Suited up and with surfboard underarm, Raya makes his way down a wooden staircase to the beach. Despite the marginal conditions, Raya zips up, paddles out and fights poor surf for a couple of hours to catch just a few waves. But he doesn’t care.

“I love being in the water,” he says. “The ocean just feels so good, and it makes everything else better. If I have a good day surfing, or even an O.K. day surfing, I can be walking down the street, get shit on by a bird, hit by a car, and I’m still O.K. My day is good.”

Raya speaks with a melodic blend of intellect and street—like John Leguizamo on his way to a Ph.D. Later, he is barefoot, in shorts and a button-down, sprawled out on the living-room floor of his apartment remembering when he first considered surfing. He was 19 years old and working as a waiter at a downtown restaurant near the beach. “I’d hear these kids at work talk about surfing like it’s the best thing on Earth. And I had a little moment when I thought to myself, ‘Can I do this?’”

Growing up poor to a single immigrant mom had left Raya with few horizons beyond his Westside neighborhood “I’d never really seen people surf, so I don’t know what the hell I was thinking,” he says.

Inspired and confident that this was not a passing fad, he saved up \$700 to buy a brand-new surfboard. When that money was stolen out of his work locker, Raya saved up another \$700, walked into the Channel Islands retail shop in downtown Santa Barbara and bought his first surfboard. “I went home, and I was so happy with it,” he says. “I had it on the bed lying next to me, and before I knew it, I passed out.”

When Manny’s mother came home and found her son sleeping next to a surfboard, she thought he was nuts. “She woke me up and said, ‘What the hell is going on here? You don’t even know how to swim!’”

The next day he called a cab to take him to Mesa Lane, a beach just north of Shoreline Park. “I tried and tried, and I finally stood up for the first time for maybe three seconds, and it was the best three seconds I had ever experienced. It was amazing.”

Right away Raya thought: “I want to do this forever!”

The poor sons and daughters of single, immigrant moms on the Westside aren't expected to go surfing; they're expected to become statistics. But that day at Mesa Lane, Raya took a major step away from the streets and toward new horizons. For beleaguered Westside and Eastside youths struggling to find a way out of dead ends and into productive lives, Manny Raya is an exception, and maybe even a lesson.

Manuel Ernesto Raya was born at Goleta Valley Hospital, in the spring of 1981. Months prior, his 19-year-old mother, unaware she was pregnant, left her hometown of Mexicali, Mexico, seeking a better life in Santa Barbara where relatives lived. Once she arrived here, she found work as a housekeeper. About a year after giving birth, she decided her son should get in touch with his roots and took him back to Mexicali.

"We lived in extremely poor conditions," says Raya of his time in Mexico. "We had an outhouse, we didn't have running water, and I remember living for years off of rice and beans."

Despite the poverty, Raya says he didn't know any better and was perfectly content. Indeed, old family photos show a happy, goofy kid surrounded by an enormous family— aunts, uncles and cousins galore. His father was mostly out of the picture, and Raya has only vague memories of him.

After about six years, Raya's mother changed her mind about living in Mexico. She told her son he was born somewhere else and they were going to move there.

"El otro lado," Raya says. "The other side—that's what they call it in Mexico. So I'd tell my friends, 'Hey, I'm going to the other side.' And I remember learning that people here spoke a different language. So I'd mess around and pretend I spoke English even though I didn't."

Ms. Raya returned to Santa Barbara first and then sent relatives back to get her son. "I remember being in a car with strangers who were speaking a language I didn't understand, coming across the desert and throwing up because I was just so nervous," says Raya.

Reunited, Raya and his mother lived with relatives on the Westside for a few years before finally getting an apartment in a complex at Castillo and Mission streets. "When we moved in, we had a mattress in a room, and that was it," recalls Raya.



Young Manny in Mexico

For the most part, Raya's pre-adolescent years were innocent enough. "I was a mama's boy," he says, recounting how he'd pick a pretty flower on the street and bring it home to his mother. "I knew I didn't have a dad or a male figure around that was going to do that for her, so I tried to do those things for her, you know?"

And while food and rent were top priorities, it was important for Ms. Raya to occasionally treat her son to new clothes or a new Super Nintendo. "She worked her ass off to make sure I had those things," says Raya, "and I was never that kid who'd say 'Oh, I need to have this.' My mom just took care of me."

But Ms. Raya worked a lot and wasn't around to supervise her son after school. Nor did she enroll him in youth sports or other after-school programs. "She never even thought about it," Raya says matter-of-factly. "She was used to Mexico, where kids just play in the streets, you know?"

Like latchkey kids tend to do, Raya and his friends created their own world. "We'd set up places all over the Westside where we could just go hang out and drink and kick it where nobody would bother us."

Raya was 14 years old the first time he was arrested. A newspaper delivery guy was dropping off papers at the Machine Gun Deli on the corner of Mission and San Pasquale streets. When he got out of the van, Raya eyed its open doors and running engine.

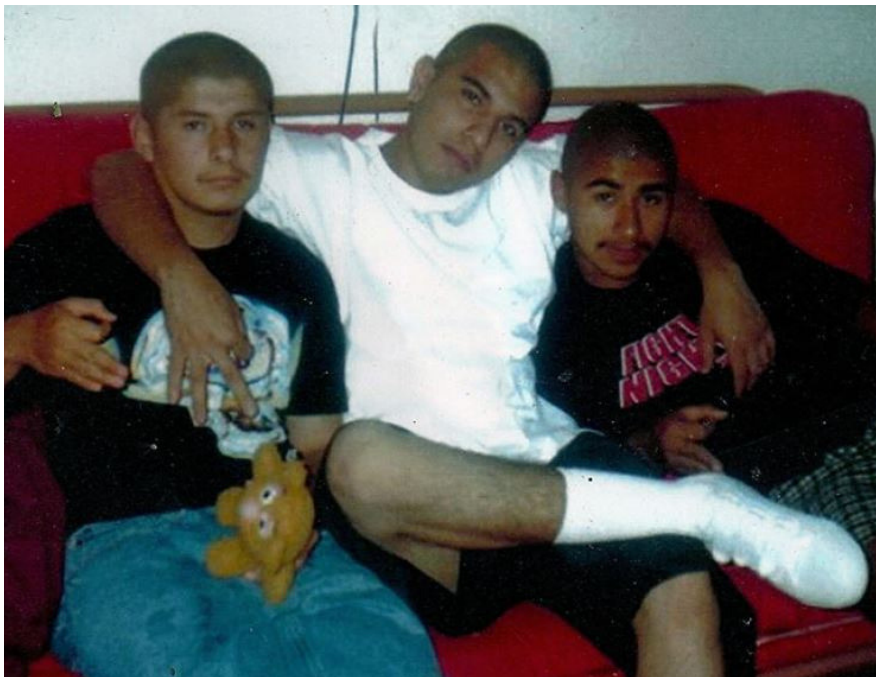
“I don’t know why I got it in my head to jump in and take it to the Eastside and go gang banging,” Raya says, laughing in disbelief. “It was like, 3 in the morning, no one was going to be around, but in my head I thought it was a great idea, so I jumped in and took off.”

After only a few blocks, a very intoxicated Raya crashed the van, jumped out and ran back to Mission Street, into the waiting arms of the police.

At the police station, Raya refused to confess to stealing the van but did own up to being drunk. “I threw up all over the station,” he remembers. “They were pissed.”

The initial charge of grand theft auto was reduced to joyriding (unlawfully taking a vehicle for a short spin and not intending to keep it), and Raya went on probation for the first time.

It didn’t take him long to violate it. During a routine probation check-in, Raya, who had been “partying all night and doing blow,” was asked to give a urine sample. Raya turned to his mother, who was sitting beside him, and said, “I’m going to stay.” It was the first of many trips he’d make to juvenile hall.



Manny, age 15, with his homies

Joining a gang was not something Raya set out to do. “It was confusing,” he admits. “As a kid you’re trying to figure out who you are, and you’re trying to separate from your family.”

In Raya’s tiny world, that meant one thing: the streets. “The gang to me was everything,” he says. “I didn’t see options. What, I was going to be a gardener?”

Jumped in (delivered a ritual beating) to the Westside Projects gang at 15 with the street name “Fozzy,” Raya’s transition from carefree boyhood to troubled-filled adolescence did not go unnoticed by his mother.

“It started to dawn on her little by little,” Raya recalls. “I’d come home and I’d have a black eye, bruises on my hands. I got arrested...”

Their relationship had always been open and respectful, but this was something Ms. Raya didn’t understand. “I know you’re better than this,” Raya remembers his mother saying. “You need to stop this somehow.”

It was a puzzling moment for the young man. “I love my mom so much,” he says, “but I was showing my love elsewhere. I remember thinking I had this strength and confidence about myself, and I just wanted to be a man!”

The police, particularly members of the gang task force, also saw a confused kid with potential. “You could tell that he was always torn between his [blood] family and his street family,” says Santa Barbara Police Department Officer Alex Cruz, who arrested Raya after the delivery van incident and who would arrest him many more times.

Cruz, who joined the police department in 1994 and was assigned to the fledgling gang task force in the late ’90s, often got phone calls from Raya’s worried mom. So, Cruz would head out looking for him.

“He had somebody that cared about where he was and whether or not he was in jail,” says Cruz. “Some kids just don’t have that support.”

“Lieutenant Ralph Molina, who worked alongside Officer Cruz on the gang task force for years, remembers that “Manny had potential, you could see it.”

Molina says he encouraged the gang unit to really get to know the kids and their families, to talk to them about life, to build mutual respect. “You’d be amazed at some of the things they’ll tell you if you have a rapport with them. They’ll tell us they’re not getting love and attention at home; they’re getting abused at home, physically, sexually... and guess what? If they’re in the streets, the homeboys will give them all the love and attention they want.”

The fact that some of these kids were living in the chaos of two to three families packed into a single apartment added even more stress to their lives, says Molina. “I’d say 85 percent of these kids are actually pretty good kids,” says Molina. “They just have messed-up lives.”

But Raya did have a loving mother and, by the time he was gangbanging, he also had a baby half-sister. For these two cops, Raya being in a gang didn’t make sense.

“We used to tell Manny all the time, ‘Your mom’s working two jobs to support you and your sister,’ recalls Cruz, “and you’re out there gangbanging? If you get arrested for vandalism or something and have to pay restitution, where does [the money] come from? Your mom! So instead of being able to feed your younger sister, she’s paying the court fees.”



Manny, age 17

Though Raya acknowledges these lectures and has a cordial relationship with Cruz and other officers, he’s not about to send thank you cards. If anything, he wishes the police gave his homeboys the same benefit of the doubt they often gave him instead of telling them they were “pieces of shit.”

Raya believes Santa Barbara’s extreme divisions contribute to the allure of gang life. The very poor Eastside and Westside are all but segregated culturally, socially and economically from the affluent neighborhoods surrounding them where resources and opportunity are almost unlimited.

“You have access to different levels of education... check out how Montecito Union is doing versus how Cleveland’s doing versus McKinley, versus Harding. Aside from that, there are different types of access that these kids have as far as programs go. You know, a middle-class or an upper-class parent might have the opportunity to put their kids in AYSO [American Youth Soccer Organization] programs, and YFL [Youth Football League] programs, in music programs and different types of things that help cultivate an individual,” says Raya. “Some of these [poorer] kids don’t have an opportunity to do any of those things at all... And since these kids don’t have very much access, they have very little control over how they’re developing and maturing.”

Raya was developing into someone who was comfortable in the world of juvenile hall—surrounded by friends (and some enemies) and getting fed three meals a day. “It was just like the streets but no sex,” Raya says with a shrug and a smile. But while he was locked up, something happened: Raya became engrossed with the books in the hall’s library. “The stories were cool,” Raya says, smiling mischievously. “Reading R.L. Stein’s *Goosebumps*, you learn about this purple slime, and I’d just trip out on these books. It took my mind somewhere else.”

Raya also enjoyed books by Dean Koontz and Stephen King. One in particular, *Primal Fear* by William Diehl, about an accused murderer who appears to have multiple personalities, made a big impression.

“That book was crazy!” says Raya. “He acted like he had two personalities, but he’s really one—the crazy one. I got out

and I saw the movie and thought, ‘That’s not what I imagined.’ It was still good, but it’s not like I pictured it in my head, you know? And I’d never thought like that before. My imagination wasn’t that vivid.”

While Raya’s reading list grew, so did his brazenness about the perils of juvenile hall and Los Prietos Boys Camp, where he lived for a year in 1997. Instead of denying any gang affiliation to the police, Raya had taken to boasting, “I’m Fozzy from the Westside Projects. What the fuck are you going to do? Lock me up? Wow! Big deal!”

“So, I started having this major disrespect for any type of authority,” says Raya. “It was about my clique, my gang, and fuck everything else. I was a real dick when it came to that.”

Raya’s attitude and yen for fighting got him expelled from the Santa Barbara Unified School District during his freshman year at San Marcos High School. Unfazed, he kept getting arrested and tossed in juvie for fighting, drinking, drug use, tagging, breaking curfew and various probation violations, including associating with other gang members.

The fuel that fed most of his bad behavior was alcohol. But Raya would often find himself waking up with two types of hangover. “If I got into a fight and beat someone up, yeah, I’d feel proud for a while, but later on I’d feel bad. Like, I harmed someone’s kid, you know?”

Raya kept his remorse hangovers to himself, afraid of showing weakness or vulnerability, and he doesn’t think he’s different in this way. “Guaranteed, some of these kids that have harmed people or murdered another kid are sitting there thinking to themselves, ‘Oh my God, what did I do?’ But are they going to express that to their friends? No, because now they’re on the verge of going to prison, and you’re going to go to prison as a guy that’s kind of insecure about himself? No! But they’re not sitting there like, ‘Yeah, I fucking killed someone! This is awesome!’”

Despite his newfound love of reading and his blossoming imagination, Raya kept screwing up. When he turned 18, the stakes got higher. A probation violation landed him in county jail. Prison loomed as the most likely destination on his horizon.

Raya found himself rapidly moving in that direction when he and a friend, armed with a tire iron and wooden stake, got arrested while getting ready to attack a couple of kids they thought were rival gang members. Raya was hit with three felonies.

Then, things really bottomed out.

Raya describes the day his mother, at home in their living room, suddenly collapsed. “I jumped off the couch, went to the floor and woke her up and said, ‘Are you O.K.?’ and she was just out of it. So I called 911.”

Ms. Raya was diagnosed with cervical cancer.

“As far back as I can remember, my mom was my rock,” Raya says. “That was the first time I saw her in a moment of weakness, and it shook my world. It started dawning on me that I love this woman, and I need to get a job and work for her.”

Soon, the beachfront El Torito restaurant had a new waiter, one who would learn of the joys of surfing from co-workers. At age 19, it was Raya’s first real job.

While Raya was awaiting the outcome of his three felony charges, a drug and alcohol counselor advised him to take classes at Santa Barbara City College to impress the judge. Raya passed his GED on the first try and enrolled at SBCC. Though he never paid much attention to school before, Raya found inspiration in one area of study: philosophy. Plato’s book, *The Allegory of the Cave*, a reading assignment for Introduction to Philosophy, captured Raya’s attention.

“The Allegory of the Cave is about this civilization of people who are shackled down,” says Raya, excited by the topic, “and in front of them they see shadows cast by people behind them. And outside of the cave there’s obviously the natural world, right? Well, one of these cave dwellers escapes the shackles and [leaves] the cave. And if you’ve ever been in a dark room, you know once you get into the light, it blinds you. But once his eyes finally adjusted, he saw that there was a world that existed outside of that cave. And that just spoke to me. Ever since I was a kid, I’ve thought this gang life, this world, going to prison, was everything that there is. But is there something else?”

The charges against Raya were reduced to one: possession of a deadly weapon. Raya was put on felony probation. If he wanted to avoid prison, he would have to find that something else.

Raya wasn't the first of his crew to consider there might be something more than the neighborhood, the streets and conveyor belt to prison. But it can be tougher to get out of a gang than it is to get in it.

Raya remembers one very close friend who wanted to jump out of the gang after getting his girlfriend pregnant. Raya advised his friend against it, urging him to "just stop, retire, you can still claim affiliation and just not partake in any gang activity... I loved the kid and I didn't want everyone turning their backs on him."

The friend insisted he wanted out for real. "When he got [jumped] out, he got hurt pretty bad." He ended up in the hospital with internal bleeding, though he did recover.

Then there's "Perico," Raya's friend since the fourth grade, when the two fought over a girl and ended up friends. They funneled into the same gang, were often locked up together and did juvie like it was a social club. "We both liked to dance," recalls Raya. "So we'd be out mopping and start break dancing and just have fun together."

Around the age of 18, Perico also got his girlfriend pregnant. He wanted to drift from the gang and turn his life around without getting jumped out. This didn't fly with the homies, many of whom turned their backs on Perico. Raya, however, refused to end their friendship.

One day, not long after leaving the gang, Perico hung himself in his closet after a fight with his girlfriend, says Raya. "It was just heartbreaking. I'd seen [something] in him. He genuinely looked like he was thinking about other things, that there was another world out there that he was trying to understand."

They were both 19 years old.

For Raya, the funeral was surreal. After viewing the body and not wanting to believe it was his friend, Raya walked outside the building, collapsed and began to sob. "I've been to many funerals," he says. "I've never broken down crying like I did at his funeral. I was crying like I've never cried before."

Compounding his sorrow was the swelling resentment Raya felt at that moment for the homies who showed up at the funeral, the same ones who'd rejected Perico after he "retired" from the gang. "In my head I was saying 'fuck you' to a lot of them."

A tattoo down Raya's right triceps reads, "R.I.P. Perico."

Raya was lucky. For whatever reason, his gang associates never turned on him when he started gangbanging less and less. "People still had a sense of confidence in me, like someone would get in trouble and they'd come to my house. They still saw me as cool, and I liked that, and I didn't want to turn my back on them. I'm just not a gangster [anymore]."

It took about three years, from age 19 to 22, for Raya to completely extricate himself from gang activity. During that time, he found a new distraction—learning. But even as he delved deeper into higher education, Raya still felt like an outsider.

"Back then, there were very few bald-headed and big-pants-, white-shirt-wearing Mexicans at city college," he remembers. "I was in a world that was completely unknown to me."

There was, however, one other young man on campus who looked like Raya—J.J. Ortiz. Both were enrolled in the school's EOPS program (Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, which helps underprivileged students get through school).

Although they came from rival gangs (Ortiz was with Old Town Goleta), the two bonded immediately. Soon enough, Raya introduced Ortiz to a surfboard.

An EOPS program advisor suggested the unlikely duo start a summer surfing camp for gang youth. And with financial

help from the late local philanthropist and revered Santa Barbara City College benefactor Eli Luria, the non-profit organization Homies Turf 2 Surf launched in 2003. The Turf 2 Surf story has been told before, but in a nutshell, for two weeks during the summer, a van would pick up rival gangbangers each morning, take them to the ocean and return them home at the end of the day.

The experience reminded campers how to be kids, says Raya. Within days, they would stop acting tough and start playing in the sand and surf. “It’s one of the most amazing things I’ve ever seen in my life,” he says.

Helping troubled kids recapture their childhoods, even for a day, is powerful enough, but Raya found the camp also helped them stake a claim in their futures.

Ever since I was a kid, I’ve thought this gang life, this world, going to prison, was everything that there is. But is there something else?

On the last day of camp, he’d tell the kids, “Look, when in your life did you ever think you’d be out here surfing? Probably never. Now imagine all the other countless possibilities you’ve never thought of—being a lawyer, being a doctor, being a college professor... owning your own shop [Ortiz owns 805 Ink on State Street]. All of these things are possible.



Manny Raya and J.J. Ortiz

Although time and money constraints put Homies Turf 2 Surf on hiatus for the last couple of summers, Raya is “80 percent sure we’re going to run it next year.”

Ironically, if Santa Barbara’s proposed gang injunction were to be enforced, Raya believes his surf camp and other programs, including the city college’s EOPS program, could be off limits to those who need it most. Currently, the injunction targets only 30 people, but many are suspicious the list will not end there if it moves forward.

“It seems almost like a social death penalty to me. You’re not allowed to be in society anymore? But I thought they paid their dues when they went to jail. I thought once they got out of jail, they’re able to rehabilitate themselves,” says Raya. “Looking at SBCC and the transitions program that they run, they have convicted felons, they have people on parole that are going to [community college] and getting their degrees and high school diplomas and being able to excel in life. Do we no longer want that?”

“If the point of this gang injunction is to help kids out, I don’t know if it really does that... If the goal of this gang injunction is to exile these individuals, well, I can see how it does that.”

After four years at Santa Barbara City College, Raya finally earned an associate’s degree in 2004. He was named “Student of the Year” in both the philosophy department and the school’s EOPS program.

Raya enrolled at UC Santa Barbara to complete his bachelor’s degree. There, he felt even more out of his comfort zone, even more self-conscious about his appearance. But Raya muscled through it all and graduated in 2006 with a 2.97 GPA.

Knowing he needed at least a 3.0 for admittance to most grad schools, Raya feared his education might be over. Two years passed before he summoned the gumption to apply.



Manny graduating UCSB in 2006

Raya's first choice was San Francisco State University. Though Raya's application was initially rejected, the philosophy department was impressed enough with his essays to intervene on his behalf. "I was fucking stoked!" says Raya.

It was the first time he had left Santa Barbara since the childhood stay in Mexico. Raya landed a job at the Olive Garden and a \$500-per-month room near campus, where he lived for the next three years. It would prove to be three of the best years of his young life.

"I signed up for a class on justice and a class on Immanuel Kant, another one on social ontology, and it was amazing!" Raya says of his first semester.

He also relished the school's intimate seminar format, in which Confucianism and the theories of French philosophers Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot and the like are discussed among a small group.

It was Hadot who resonated most with Raya. Hadot believed that philosophy is a way of life; that it helps us understand the world and how we perceive it, and ultimately what our roles in society will be. "All the thoughts that had been building up in my head that I couldn't really articulate were coming together," says Raya. "I was getting a voice, and it all happened in San Francisco."

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But Raya still felt like an oddball, intimidated by his classmates' vocabularies and pedigrees. "I went to a professor and said, 'I know I got into this school, but I don't know if I belong here. I feel completely out of place.'"

That professor was Shelley Wilcox, who is still on the San Francisco State University faculty. Wilcox taught Raya in three classes—Justice, Environmental Ethics and Political Theory.

Wilcox explained to Raya that those with more privileged educational backgrounds feel more confident because they're raised to believe that they have something important and correct to say. She reassured him that he had every right to be in the program. Not only did Raya belong, according to Wilcox, he displayed an intellectual flexibility with the material that impressed her.

"There was something special about him. Philosophy mattered to him in a way that it doesn't matter to a lot of students," says Wilcox. "He's not shy about expressing a feminist viewpoint or his own disdain for homophobia. So he comes to the discipline partly because he's motivated by his own interest in finding the theory of justice, but it's not just for him..."

Of Wilcox, Raya simply says, “I love her to death. She’s my mentor.”

In the spring of 2011, Raya graduated with a master’s degree in philosophy from SFSU, but not before his experience as a teaching assistant infected him with the teaching bug. Raya rode the Graduate Teaching Assistants program to Santa Barbara City College, where it all began. He’s been an adjunct philosophy professor there since the fall of 2011.

Back when he first started, Raya couldn’t quite envision the kind of teacher he would be, but he knew exactly the kind he didn’t want to be. “I always had a problem with some professors because I felt like they were talking down at me or talking at me, instead of talking with me,” Raya says. “I wanted to just have a conversation, talk about life like we’re doing right now, and just be myself.”

His approach seems to be working.

Tyler Rhodes, a 19-year-old city college student, remembers seeing his new teacher for the first time when he signed up for Raya’s Ethics class about a year ago.

“He was wearing a tank top, he was totally tatted up and buff, and my first thought was, ‘How is this guy qualified to teach this class?’”

But it didn’t take long for Raya—often seen riding around campus on a skateboard—to make his mark. “In the first 20 minutes, he made us realize that philosophy is a lifelong process that you engage in, not something you study, that it’s a way of life,” says Rhodes. “He lit this spark, and it turned into everyone’s favorite class.”

Rhodes admits he was completely ignorant of gang culture, having been raised in a privileged suburb of San Francisco called Pleasanton. When Raya shared his checkered past during a lecture about justice, Rhodes had an epiphany.

“It made me realize that there are so many prejudices that we have about people we don’t understand,” says Rhodes. “Manny really tries to convince you, and he succeeds—that there is humanity in everybody no matter how bad the acts they commit, and that everybody has a right to make something of themselves.”



Manny Raya (far right) and his Santa Barbara City College students in San Diego at the 2013 spring International Business Ethics Case Competition, where his team took first place in its division.

Rhodes, who thought he was on a path to becoming a corporate lawyer, says that first ethics class sent him in an entirely different direction. Class discussions about the Arab Spring of 2010 were the catalyst.

“I didn’t even know that I was interested in the Middle East,” recalls Rhodes. “But learning about these different areas of the world where interpersonal relationships are judged in other ways, I totally shifted focus.”

Now, Rhodes is learning Arabic and next year wants to declare a double major in philosophy and Middle Eastern studies at, fingers crossed, Columbia University. He still plans on law school, but hopes to one day use his legal skills to help establish democratic institutions for what might be a new Middle East.

“None of this would be possible without taking Manny’s class,” says Rhodes.

On a late Friday afternoon, a shy but cheerful Ms. Raya, who has just finished a workday of cleaning houses, welcomes company to her modest but well-appointed Eastside apartment where she relocated when Raya left home for grad school. She and her son sift through family photos.

“First day of school... Harding,” she says with a big smile, looking at a picture of her proud, beaming son. “First grade.”

Ms. Raya has survived two bouts with cancer and is currently healthy. Her English is solid but limited. She grunts with distaste when Raya holds up an old photo of himself posing shirtless, flashing his gang sign and proudly displaying the large gothic “VPR” (Varrío Projects Rifa) gang initials tattooed down his right arm.

Raya chuckles at his mother’s reaction, and the easy relationship they have is apparent. “Remember those days?” Raya asks.

She winces, and then smiles. The past, at last, appears to be the past.

