The newest designee of the Board of Regents, Ernest Calderón envisions the future of education

Ernest Calderón, '79, knows that it's impossible to figure out where you're going if you don't know where you came from. These days, the 46-year-old attorney from Phoenix has a pretty good fix on both. His humble beginnings have afforded him a deep and abiding appreciation for what it takes to build a better community—and society. As a recent designee to the Arizona State Board of Regents, Calderón now has an opportunity to continue his lifelong quest to make education more accessible to all—and build a better world.

If it all sounds wildly idealistic, then welcome to Ernest Calderón's world. "We live in extremely challenging times," he observes. "My goal is to have a positive impact on other people's lives. Success isn't only about individual achievement; it's about what we do as a society to help each other and make our lives better." For Calderón—law partner, husband, father, community activist and citizen—it's not as much a philosophy as a way of life.

Calderón's list of accomplishments is enough to fill an entire three-ring binder. Among the highlights: He's a former president of the Arizona State Bar Association, an advisor to Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano, National Hispanic Bar Association 2002 "Latino Lawyer of the Year" and a past nominee for the Arizona Supreme Court. Calderón voluntarily removed himself from consideration for the latter position when he learned that if appointed he would have to cease his involvement in more than 20 civic and charitable organizations, ranging from the Boy Scouts of America to the Arizona Community Foundation.

To be sure, he's a man on a mission. And with seemingly boundless energy and determination, the former NAU student body president isn't about to slow down.

He has already formulated an agenda for his upcoming stint on the Board of Regents once he's confirmed by the board, and he's committed to effecting continuing change through the legal profession.

"I have been extremely fortunate to achieve success in life, and I don't ever want to forget my roots or some of the breaks that came my way while I was growing up," he says.

An Education in Life

If you want to understand Calderón's sense of purpose and passion, it's best to rewind to his childhood. He was born in Morenci, Arizona, in 1957—which then had a population of about 7,000. His father, a copper miner, and mother, a short-order cook, took a deep interest in his activities and accomplishments from an early age. "My parents taught me that winning the fight isn't as important as picking yourself up and trying again if you fail," he says.

By Samuel Greengard • Photography by Michael Mertz
Early on, Calderón recognized that he wasn’t living in Mayberry R.F.D. Segregation and racism entered the picture in a sometimes ugly way. “As a small child, I wondered why certain people could live in certain areas but not others. The Hispanics, Native Americans and African Americans all lived in assigned neighborhoods,” he says. As a teenager, Calderón also encountered individuals who would not consider him for a job because of his Hispanic heritage. “It gave me a profound understanding of what it is like to be excluded,” he says.

At the same time, Calderón embraced the Catholic Church and the Boy Scouts, both of which helped him refine his moral and ethical foundation. He eventually became an Eagle Scout and for a while toyed with the idea of becoming a priest. “That thought died out when puberty hit,” he chuckles. Although Calderón’s family was a “working-class, blue-collar family” that avoided poverty, he was deeply struck by the injustice of people being judged by the color of their skin and not the content of their character. That set him directly on the path to becoming a lawyer.

**Consensus Builder**

After high school, Calderón was fortunate enough to earn a scholarship (“I couldn’t have gone to college without it,” he says) and enrolled at Northern Arizona University. He received a bachelor’s degree in political science in 1979 and received the President’s Prize. Serving as student body president, he gained an appreciation—and a sense of respect—for divergent ideas and opinions. “I learned how to work toward consensus,” he explains.

By 1982, Calderón had earned a law degree from Arizona State University. Then, after gaining admission to the bar, Calderón landed a position as a law clerk working for U.S. District Judge Walter E. Craig. He spent the next two years learning the legal ropes before joining Arizona Public Service in 1984 as a litigation attorney. Later, after serving as director of legal affairs for Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Arizona, he joined a private practice in 1989. Now a partner at the Phoenix firm of Jennings, Strouss & Salmon, Calderón practices employment law, including cases involving sexual harassment, discrimination and wrongful termination.

**‘Fair and Open-minded’**

Professional associates aren’t shy about expressing their admiration for Calderón. “He is open to different opinions, and he has the patience, persistence and willingness to examine all sides of a dispute,” says Gerald Alston, a partner at Jennings, Strouss & Salmon. “Because he isn’t quick to lock into a position, others find him fair and open-minded.” Adds Jack Pfister, a fellow attorney and former regent, “Ernie is smart and has good common sense.”

Yet work is only part of Calderón’s life. “The most important things are my family, community involvement and religion,” he says. Calderón married Karen Gians in 1986 (she is a judge for the Industrial Commission of Arizona and a lawyer in Maricopa County) and has four children, ranging in age from 9 to 13. He makes it a point to spend quality time with them. “It’s a far more difficult time to grow up than when I was a boy, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. My job is to educate them so they can make the right choices in life,” he says.

“Ernie is loyal to his family, the church and his colleagues,” says Joseph Rolle, ’61 and ’80, a former NAU dean who is a close friend of Calderón. “If someone needs help he is always there. Someday I expect him to be governor of Arizona.”

**Passing the Test**

Calderón’s quest to improve education and better society has only begun. He’s well aware that an appointment to the Board of Regents will represent a unique oppor-
tunity to put his stamp on education over the next eight years. One of his primary concerns is making a college education affordable to all students who qualify. "With costs and prices spiraling, it's important to take a hard look at things and begin to prioritize," he says. "I would like to see every family believe that a college education is an expectation and not a dream."

He also would like to see NAU and other schools expand programs in rural areas to reach further into underserved communities, particularly where the combination of low income and geography makes college an elusive goal. He hopes to confront an array of other issues, including improving faculty and staff salaries; ensuring the viability of intercollegiate sports; increasing faculty, student body and administrative diversity; and establishing more cost-effective long-term contracts.

Meanwhile, his love for NAU remains firmly intact. "It has changed my life in a profound way. It has helped me carve out a successful, meaningful life," Calderón says. "Now it's my duty and responsibility to return the favor. I hope to make a positive impact on education and society in the years ahead."

The Calderon family (from left): Stephen, Karen, Mary Margaret, Ernie, Katie and Michael. Michael is 13, the triplets (yes, triplets) are 9.