Alumnus Brings Hundreds of Elementary Students to DU for College Prep
by Kristin Kemp

Even though Julio Alas graduated several years ago, you can still find him on the DU campus regularly. As an Early Childhood Education (ECE) and English Language Acquisition (ELA) teacher for the Denver Public Schools system, he partners with DU to bring hundreds of local elementary school students to campus annually for DU Day Action events.

Alas (BA ‘08, psychology and Spanish; MA ‘11, curriculum and instruction) works on helping would-be first-generation students consider college as a viable post-high school option. He accompanies local school children and their parents to DU for campus tours, bilingual meetings with current college students and faculty, and sessions to learn about college access and financial aid.

“We always speak to students about this mystical place called ‘college’ and what happens there, but for many of the students, this concept is too abstract,” said Alas, who in 2013 approached DU’s Center for Multicultural Excellence, DU Service and Change (DUSC) and the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning to create the on-campus experience for elementary students and their families.

The fourth annual spring event—called “College? For Certain!”—includes hundreds of students from Johnson, Trevista and Stein elementary schools.

For the past four years Alas has worked with DU to recruit students, faculty and alumni as bilingual volunteers. The event expanded this year to include a “Growing Green” track, with projects at the DU Bridge Community Garden, Groundwork Denver, Sister Gardens and Denver Parks and Recreation. It also included a “Building Community” track with Habitat for Humanity. The day culminated in a celebration with interactive games, activities and refreshments, plus a volunteer fair hosted by Colorado Young Leaders and DUSC.

“We are planting the seeds of education in these young minds, and I can’t wait to see what the future will hold for these students as they grow older and contemplate the possibility of pursuing higher education,” said Alas.

DU Day of Action isn’t the only way Alas fuses his work with his alma mater. He’s an active member of the DU Latino Alumni Association and has served as the student relations committee chair, coordinating World Read Aloud Day at Munroe Elementary, which engages DU students, faculty, staff and alumni in spending time and reading aloud with elementary students to promote a love of reading.

“As an elementary school teacher in an environment that is riddled with poverty and students with high-needs for learning, Julio continues to be enthusiastic and committed to the learning outcomes for his students despite many obstacles,” said Adrienne Martinez, assistant director of inclusive excellence access and success at DU.
“Julio goes above and beyond his role as a teacher to better serve the students with whom he works. He sees the learning experience as shared and he is unyielding in his commitment to student success,” she added.

[PHOTO: Michael Gooch, CCESL Social Media Specialist]