In the fall of 2001, students supporting a "living wage" for Harvard's janitors and other low-paid employees held rallies to keep the pressure on the University. For Priscilla Orta '05, one event in particular stands out: a clean-cut state representative from Cambridge, addressing the crowd alternately in English and Spanish, who revealed genuine passion in describing the workers' plight. "He was almost crying, he was so upset with what was going on. That impressed me," says Orta, 19, a Mexican American. "That was very honorable. There aren't many people who still bring emotion to politics."

The young politician was Jarrett Barrios '90. Last fall, after two terms as a state representative, he became the first Latino and first openly gay state senator in Massachusetts. His district spans seven cities and towns, including the heavily working-class Revere, Saugus, and Everett, and his home base, Cambridge.

Interest in conventional politics came relatively late to Barrios, a Florida-born Cuban American. As an undergraduate on scholarship, he had to work at various jobs to help pay tuition, including one as night supervisor at the University Lutheran Homeless Shelter, and another at the Plough and Stars, a bar/club where he did everything from clean the toilets to cook brunch. But if "the political stuff"—like Harvard College Democrats or student government—"just wasn't my world at that point," as Barrios says, he was already an activist. He helped Central American refugees as a member of Centro Presente, served as cochairman of the Harvard-Radcliffe Bisexual, Gay, and Lesbian Association, and helped lead opposition to ROTC's return to campus, citing the group's policy against admitting homosexuals.

Barrios describes his relatives—manual laborers who immigrated from Cuba between 1896 and 1925 (his grandparents rolled cigars and worked in a cigar-box company in Tampa)—as primarily "Roosevelt Democrats" who believed that government existed to help those in need, in contrast to the many, wealthier, professional Cubans who fled to Florida after Castro's 1959 victory and tended to vote Republican. His father is a carpenter, his mother a social worker for the state of Florida. It was quite a leap—cultural, geographic, and social—from his life in Tampa to Harvard Yard. By the end of his sophomore year, with paid work depleting his energy for schoolwork, he wondered if he had made the wrong decision. "I thought of dropping out," he says. "I felt directionless."

In search of a deeper mission, he headed, in the summer of 1988, to Mexico to work for Los Niños de Baja California, an organization that promotes economic development and improved nutrition. He taught English in the slums of Mexicali and was disturbed to find children playing in a trash dump every day because their parents squeezed out a living by selling bits of other people's refuse. "That's what got me interested in politics," he explains. "The politics of hunger and food: who's got it and who's not getting it. In Mexicali, Mexico."

The social-studies concentrator was so affected by his work in Mexicali that he taught English in the slums of Mexicali and was disturbed to find children playing in a trash dump every day because their parents squeezed out a living by selling bits of other people's refuse. "That's what got me interested in politics," he explains. "The politics of hunger and food: who's got it and who's not getting it. In Mexicali, Mexico."

"In customary style, Jarrett Barrios visits with neighbors in his Inman Square, Cambridge, neighborhood."
stayed on into the fall of his junior year and returned the following summer. Armed with a new belief that politics would enable him to improve people’s lives, in his senior year he replied to an ad in the student-employment office for a political internship focusing on environmental issues. The job was with then-Boston city councilor David Scondras ’67, the city’s first openly gay councilor. Scondras’s example while in office, Barrios says, “showed me that [being gay] shouldn’t be a barrier” to holding office.

It wasn’t long before Barrios launched himself wholeheartedly into politics, campaigning for Scondras and another liberal-leaning Boston city councilor, Rosario Salerno. In 1991, the 23-year-old Barrios managed Scondras’s successful reelection campaign before leaving Boston to attend Georgetown Law School. After graduating in 1995, he returned to Boston with a job at the law firm Hill & Barlow. (When the firm folded, he joined Piper Rudnick.)

Plans for a political run of his own were soon in the works. In 1998, Barrios defeated a five-term incumbent to win a Massachusetts House seat representing several Cambridge neighborhoods. His campaign, though well-financed by colleagues and friends in the legal world, was nevertheless driven by his own incessant door-to-door campaigning and a focus on affordable housing, expanded healthcare coverage, and investment in public education. During that term and the one that followed, he helped create a statewide low-income-housing tax credit and a state-sponsored affordable-housing trust fund. He also counted among his legislative victories a law that required interpreter services in hospital emergency rooms. For a change of pace, he held evening salsa dance classes at the statehouse.

But legislative success in the tightly controlled House depends heavily on Speaker Thomas Finneran’s beneficence, and Barrios was never a favored son. In 2001, he sought clout outside the House by serving as spokesman for the state Democratic Party’s “shadow government initiative,” which highlighted policy differences between the Democrat-controlled legislature and the acting Republican governor, Jane Swift.

Despite that high-profile post and backing from Finneran’s opponents, a jump to the more powerful state senate seemed unlikely. The 33-year-old Barrios would have to win a district that included some of the most blue-collar communities in eastern Massachusetts. The district did include Cambridge, and its previous senator was another Harvard graduate, Thomas Birmingham ’72, J.D. ’78, who gave up his post as senate president to run for governor. But Birmingham, a Chelsea native and labor lawyer, enjoyed solid support among trade unions.

Barrios nevertheless decided to take the chance. His sexual orientation came up only near the end of the race: one of his two opponents took out full-page advertisements in local newspapers reminding voters that Barrios was gay and claiming that he had received contributions from “a gay special-interest group that supports gay candidates throughout the country” and had described his life partner, Doug Hattaway, as his “spouse” in a financial document.

On election day, Barrios won in a landslide, taking six of the eight districts. That made him the first gay Latino elected to any state senate in the country, according to the Washington-based Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund. The win also came in a district in which only eight percent of regis-
tered voters were Latino, proving that his support extended far beyond his ethnic base. Some supporters cited his four years in the House; neither opponent had any statehouse experience. On victory night, Barrios gave part of his acceptance speech in Spanish and hugged Hattaway (a former spokesman for the Gore presidential campaign) on stage.

For Orta, whose great-great-grandparents immigrated from Mexico and who now heads RAZA, the College’s Mexican-American student association, Barrios’s election underlines the need for minority candidates to convince voters in increasingly mixed communities that they can represent everyone. Yet Orta, who grew up near Toledo, Ohio, could barely imagine Barrios’s victory back home. “Being Hispanic would have been one strike against him, and being gay would have just

Hooray for Harvardwood

Alumni in Hollywood rolled out the red carpet for 14 undergraduates who flew to Tinseltown during intersession for “Harvardwood 101,” an inside look at the arts and entertainment industry. “It’s meant to give them a broad sample of what’s available in terms of careers, and to demystify Hollywood,” says Mia Riverton ’99, a Los Angeles actress (One on One, Strong Medicine) and co-founder of the alumni network Harvardwood, which spearheaded the trip. Along with a tour of a Warner Brothers studio lot and visits to Creative Artists Agency and Universal Music Group, the students met with TV writers, talent managers, executives, and other Harvard alumni who discussed what they do.

It’s a trip Riverton (formerly known to classmates as Esther Riggin) would have appreciated as a student. “There was not a lot of exposure to careers in entertainment when I was at Harvard, and, frankly, Harvard did not have a lot of resources in that area,” says Riverton. An economics concentrator with a performance background, she chose to become an actress after a cursory stint in financial services. “When I moved out here I hardly knew anyone established in the field. So I created an e-mail list for 20 or so friends from college who were crazy like me and pursuing their Hollywood dreams.”

The list soon grew to 100 alumni. She also met film producer and executive Stacy Cohen ’89 (White Oleander) and development executive Adam Fratto ’90 (The Dead Zone), who, as it turned out, “had been trying to reach out to younger Harvard alumni through informational interviews and other means,” Riverton says. “We brainstormed about other ways to do that, because it was obvious to us that there was a huge need for some sort of network.”

They estimate that several thousand alumni hold prominent positions in arts and entertainment, and that roughly eight percent of young alumni choose to pursue careers in the field. The nascent network, christened “Harvardwood,” is now a non-profit entity with more than 1,300 members who trade news, advice, job tips, publicity for events, and other career-related information. The group developed the Harvardwood LA Writers, a monthly gathering where alumni share their work, and earlier this year produced the first Harvardwood Talent Showcase. Harvardwood members hold regular mixers and screening events in Los Angeles and New York City. (To contact Harvardwood, visit www.harvardwood.org, or e-mail harvardwood@mindspring.com.)

The group’s primary goals are to increase access on campus to arts and entertainment professionals and to support and inform alumni in the field. They plan to work with a relatively new undergraduate club (the Harvard Entertainment Association), hold events, send representatives to recruitment fairs and to the annual ArtsFirst Festival, and to develop partnerships for career counseling and mentoring. A Harvardwood summer internship program will be offered in conjunction with the Office of Career Services and the Office for the Arts (both of which helped cosponsor the January trip).

“We are entirely volunteer-run at this point,” notes Riverton, who puts out three different e-mail publications from her home—a writers’ digest, a jobs hotline, and a newsletter. “The next step is to put together an advisory board and develop infrastructure and funding. For example, we’d like to create a searchable on-line alumni database.”

To that end, the group has approached the Harvard Alumni Association about creating a formal relationship between the network and the University. For its part, the HAA is examining opportunities to interact with various alumni “shared interest groups” that grow out of a University affiliation, like the Harvard African Students Association Network, Harvard Startups, and the Gay and Lesbian Caucus. “We feel there is a need for the information and resources that we can provide,” Riverton says, “and we would love to share the University’s resources.”

~NELL PORTER BROWN

Alumni Mia Riverton, Adam Fratto, and Stacy Cohen bask in the sunshine beneath the Hollywood Hills.
Hispanics are now the largest minority group in the United States, outpacing even African Americans, according to the most recent census data. Barrios says he is part of the rising tide of Hispanic political influence. “We are in a place now where, rather than being on the outside protesting, we are increasingly on the inside,” he says. But ethnicity, like his sexual orientation, is only part of his thinking when it comes to choosing issues and casting votes. “I don’t view myself as ‘the Latin legislator,’” he says. “I view myself as a legislator who is informed in part by my Latino background, who is informed in part by my sexual orientation, but also by a host of other values.”

Barrios says he’s lucky to be able to represent his “communities,” whose voices often go unheard. “There will always be people for whom I am the butt of some joke,” he concedes. “There will always be people who focus on a negative stereotype, whose principles put us all in the gutter. But my preference while standing on the street or in the gutter, with apologies to Oscar Wilde, is to keep looking at the stars. I’m proud of what my parents made in me.”

Although a Boston newspaper has suggested he may be destined for Congress, Barrios says only that he’ll decide whether to run for reelection to the senate before the end of his current two-year term. His focus is on the 40-member Senate, which offers individual members a better chance to effect change than does the 160-member House. He chairs the public-safety committee and is vice-chairman of the healthcare committee. His legislative priorities include childcare, schools, housing, and access to healthcare—traditional Democratic issues. He has already endorsed proposals that would raise wages among human-service workers, protect consumers from unwarranted bank fees and unfair lending, and lower the cost of prescription drugs. How this agenda fares with a new Republican governor and a fearsome state deficit remains to be seen.

Despite the general public’s often cynical view of politicians, political life makes sense to Barrios because he has identified clearly in his own mind just why he is there. “If you’ve ever worked with a child who goes to bed hungry, if you’ve ever helped a family unable to provide the things for that child that we might consider basic—like food, or vaccinations, or primary education—you know the answer to that question,” he says. “You know that through your efforts you can revolutionize their world.” —John McElhenny

John McElhenny is a freelance writer in Somerville, Massachusetts, and a former political reporter for the Associated Press in Boston.

**Vote Now**

To be counted, all votes for Overseers and Harvard Alumni Association elected directors must be returned by noon on May 30. Results of the election will be announced on Commencement Day, June 5.

**For Overseer** (six-year term, five to be elected):
- Roger Ferguson ’73, J.D. ’77, Ph.D. ’81, Washington, D.C. Vice chairman of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System.
- Joan Steitz, Ph.D. ’67, Branford, Conn.

**For HAA Director** (three-year term, six to be elected):
- Alexander Aldrich ’80, Montpelier, Vt. Executive director, Vermont Arts Council.
- Joseph Azelby ’84, Cresskill, N.J. Real estate CEO and managing director, J.P. Morgan Fleming Asset Management (New York City).
- Thomas Castro ’76, Houston. President, El Dorado Communications Inc.
- Mark Chandler ’78, Palo Alto. Vice president of legal services and general counsel, Cisco Systems Inc.
- Susan Fales-Hill ’84, New York City. Writer, television producer.

John Harvard’s Journal

finished him off,” she explains. “But he won!”