

# Spare Parts: Four Undocumented Teenagers, One Ugly Robot, and the Battle for the American Dream

by Joshua Davis

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## About the Book

In 2004, four Latino teenagers from Carl Hayden Community High School in Phoenix, Arizona, arrived at the University of California, Santa Barbara, to participate in the Marine Advanced Technology Education Robotics Competition. Going up against some of the best collegiate engineers in the country (including an MIT team funded by ExxonMobil), Oscar, Cristian, Luis and Lorenzo wowed the judges --- and raised the stakes in America's immigration debate. Born in Mexico but raised in Arizona, they were undocumented and their team was underfunded, but thanks to the support of two enthusiastic teachers, the kids from the desert managed to build an award-winning underwater robot using scavenged parts. Tracing their journey, including the decade after their high school triumphs, *SPARE PARTS* gives voice to a group of young men who proved to be among the most patriotic and talented students in this country --- even as the country tried to kick them out.

## Discussion Guide

1. The book opens with a quote from the competition's design and building specs, reminding students to pursue an imaginative exploration of the new and the unexpected. What did the Carl Hayden team discover about the importance of imagination and creativity, in engineering and in life?
2. What solutions does *SPARE PARTS* present for helping teenagers excel in school and build healthy friendships? What can we learn from the robotics team about reaching out to at-risk youth?
3. Did *SPARE PARTS* change the way you see America's immigration controversy? If you could re-write the nation's immigration policies, what changes would you make (if any)?
4. Discuss the different approaches to parenting captured in the book, from Lorenzo's father, Pablo (a stoic man with the

endurance to feed his family by hunting), to Oscar's mother, Manuela (a sensitive soul who battles anxiety). How far would you go to protect your children against poverty and violence?

5. What makes the book's title a good metaphor for the boys' community? How are the students affected as their robot, Stinky, comes to life in the Scuba Sciences pool?

6. Discuss the role of education in society. Manuela tells Joshua Davis that the fees for attending public schools in Mexico were small but sometimes hard to meet. How does a free education contribute to a free society? Should the curriculum include bilingual instruction?

7. How did you react to Oscar's story? What did his journey reveal about true patriotism? Should marriage and military service become guaranteed gateways to citizenship?

8. What did it take for Lorenzo to turn his back on his cousins' gang?

9. Cristian could not continue attending Arizona State University after Proposition 300 was enacted; his tuition quadrupled, totaling more than \$50,000 to complete his degree. Should America invest more in students who want to study STEM (science, technology, engineering, math)? What is your opinion of the DREAM Act?

10. What did Luis gain from his experience on the robotics team? How should we measure the value of a school program?

11. What motivates Fredi Lajvardi and Allan Cameron to dedicate their careers to public school teaching?

12. Has your community been affected by the recent surge in young immigrants from Central America? How does their immigration story compare to your family's?

13. How was Joshua Davis's storytelling style enhanced by his career as a magazine journalist (and as the author of a memoir, *THE UNDERDOG*)? As Davis described the filming of the closing scene in the movie *SPARE PARTS*, did you prefer the Hollywood ending or the journalistic one?

## Author Bio

Joshua Davis has been a contributing editor at *Wired* for a decade and is the cofounder of *Epic* magazine. He is the author of *THE UNDERDOG*, a memoir about his experiences as an arm wrestler, backward runner and matador. In 2014, his work for *Wired* was nominated for a National Magazine Award for feature writing. He has also written for *The New Yorker* and other periodicals, and his writing is anthologized in the 2012 edition of *BEST AMERICAN SCIENCE AND NATURE WRITING*, as well as in the 2006, 2007 and 2009 editions of *BEST TECHNOLOGY WRITING*. The movie *Spare Parts* is based on his reporting. He lives in San Francisco with his family.

## Critical Praise

SPARE PARTS is one of those rare stories that grabs hold and doesn't let go. It's hilarious, sad and beautifully told. It will make you think hard about what it means to be American and where we will find the next generation of talent.

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