



Photo courtesy of Richard Wisdom/Knight-Ridder Tribune

A segment of Latino culture is captured in David Gonzalez' Homies. The tiny, 50-cent figurines accent Latino dark eyes and tan skin with baggy pants, oversized shirts and sunglasses.

'Homies' figurines hit sour note with some

By Anne Martinez
Knight-Ridder Tribune

SAN JOSE, Calif. — Peering from gum ball machines and the pages of online auction Web sites are two-inch tributes to a segment of Latino culture some would rather forget.

The tiny, 50-cent figurines, called Homies, accent their dark eyes and tan skin with baggy pants, oversized shirts and sunglasses. A few don knit caps and bandannas. They go by nicknames such as Smiley and Mr. Raza.

Their sweeping commercial success, however, spotlights an emerging dilemma entrepreneurs face as they try to depict and market to ethnic groups in an increasingly diverse country: A fine line exists between perpetuating a stereotype and trying to break one.

"Everyone, in any specific ethnic group, is going to have to face these issues at some point," said Felipe Korzeny, co-founder of Cheskin Research, a Redwood Shores firm that specializes in multicultural marketing. "Coming up with these kinds of toys can be helpful in establishing dialogue and, in many ways, breaking stereotypes."

As Homies creator David Gonzalez quickly found, it's a tough balance when trying to mainstream elements of Latino culture into the world of Barbie Dolls and Rugrats. The San Jose State University alumnus has come under fire as he tries to demystify life in a Mexican-American barrio through comical characters largely inspired by former college buddies.

Several stores in Southern California and Texas last year stopped carrying Homies, a slang term used to describe close friends, after Latino and law enforcement leaders claimed the toys glorified

negative images and glamorized gangs.

The controversy, though, has done little to curb the caricatures' popularity. More than 4 million Homies have been sold nationwide since they first debuted last year. Many San Jose gum ball machines have run dry for months. At their peak, some were refilled every three days, sometimes 25 times over.

The toys even outsold Pokemon, according to machine vendor Allen Towles, who bought a second home in the Sierra Mountains with the help of money he made selling 100,000 Homies. And on a recent day, there were more than 40 listings offering Homies toys on Web Auction giant eBay.

Gonzales expects even greater success with his newest line of younger, toned-down figurines, called Mijos, a Spanish term of endearment for children. The characters, which hit stores this month, still dress in baggy clothes and go by nicknames such as Mousy and Spooky. But their appearance is far less controversial. In fact, they look like wide-eyed, innocent kids.

Gonzales concedes he created the Mijos in response to the brewing backlash. But he's determined to popularize his Homies much in the same way the Saturday-morning favorite Fat Albert caricatured African-Americans in the 70s.

By the end of the year, Gonzalez plans to release 48 new Homies figurines. And he's talking with business executives about creating trading cards, a Saturday-morning cartoon and even an animated film around the growing phenomenon. Several stores, including Tower Records, Warehouse and Miller's Outpost, now sell the first series of Homies as a package.

"Not all Latinos look like Ricky Martin or Jennifer Lopez," said

Gonzales, 40, who grew up in Richmond and now works out of his two-story home in Solano County. "There's hundreds of thousands of kids who look more like my toys."

If marketing statistics are any indication, Gonzalez' effort has the making for success. The U.S. retail market is clamoring for ethnic-specific toys, as Latino buying power approaches \$400 billion a year — almost triple what it was 20 years ago, according to Korzeny.

Within 20 years, Latinos will make up the single largest ethnic group in California.

"This is about the best cultural time to be Hispanic," said Korzeny, adding that toys must have cross-cultural appeal to be successful. "Right now it's cool to be Latino."

He predicts a similar commercial phenomenon will occur within the Asian community, the fastest growing immigrant group in the country. And increasingly, traditional limits will be tested.

The chasm created by the Homies becomes clear when you talk to people like San Jose police Sgt. Carlos Paredes. The gang-unit veteran called the toys "cute" and, unlike many of his law enforcement counterparts, does not believe they promote violent behavior. He even fondly remembers dressing in the same bandannas and baggy pants as a teenager in San Jose.

"...But I wouldn't buy them for my kids," Paredes said of the Homies. "It's part of our culture, but when people from the outside look at it, you're a gangster."

Liz Hernandez shares a similar dilemma. She acknowledges not everyone who dresses in oversized clothes and knit caps qualify as gang members. But she also knows firsthand the power of that stereotype.

When her youngest son, Gabriel, was sent to the hospital

dressed in a baggy shirt and pants after getting into a fight at James Lick High School, a nurse called the police fearing Gabriel was involved with a gang.

"Being Mexican is hard enough," said Hernandez, who lives in an upper-middle class area of San Jose's Evergreen neighborhood. "Dressing in baggy pants and a bandanna will only hurt you."

Homies have become popular among kids at Santa Clara County's Mexican American Community Services Agency's youth centers, much to the chagrin of Latino staff members who found the dolls offensive. Maria Elena de la Garza, director of one of the Gilroy centers, said she pulled aside an 8-year-old boy who began collecting the figurines.

"He thought it was cool," she said. "I told him it's not cool, because some people think all Mexicans look like that."

Despite the controversy, the toys have found a broad following among teens and adults. A group of teens in Willow Glen wanted to know where to buy the figurines after seeing them for the first time last week.

"I like to dress like a cholo sometimes," said Mark Lemmon, 16, pointing to his baggy khaki pants. "It's hard, though, because I'm white."

For many Mexican-Americans like de la Garza, concerns about the Homies stem from sour childhood memories of fighting stereotypes they say the figurines represent.

But even de la Garza and Hernandez, the San Jose mother, concede the toys have a potential to break age-old cliches if more people knew about the story behind them. If the public knew, for instance, that Hernandez developed many of his characters 20 years ago as part of a comic strip from his days in a middle-class neigh-

borhood in Richmond and as a graphic design student at San Jose State.

And the characters have distinct personalities that Gonzalez posts on his Web site at www.homiescentral.com. Some are ex-gang members who are now gang counselors. Others are activists with college degrees in Chicano studies.

Some of the Homies' real-life counterparts are just as intriguing. Mr. Raza, the figurine dressed in sunglasses and a Mexican sarape, is now an Alameda County deputy district attorney. Smiley, a jovial character that never leaves home without his bandanna and sunglasses, is a Pacific Bell service technician in Oakland.

"We're not social outcasts," said Steven Jesse Corral, the district attorney. "By bringing [Homies toys] into commerce, Dave is bringing us into the mainstream."

Making that leap, however, has historically proven difficult.

In 1994, comedian Margaret Cho faced mounting criticism for her role in the ABC sitcom "All American Girl", which portrayed a Korean American family that spoke with heavy accents.

And just last year, the debut of the nation's first hip-hop comic strip, "The Boondocks," created a controversy because of its racial humor about two black teenagers who leave a Chicago urban neighborhood and move to the suburbs. A handful of newspapers dropped the strip only to later reinstate it because of its overwhelming popularity.

Gonzales doesn't expect overnight acceptance but sees a prosperous road ahead.

"It's a part of Americana, and it's going to be recognized that way over time," he said.

A&E briefs

Museum of Natural History exhibits a variety of cultures

Several exhibits are on display at the University of Oregon Museum of Natural History, 1680 E. 15th Ave.

Exhibits include "Archaeology of Oregon," "Backyard Birds," "Clues to an Unknown Culture," "Living Traditions," "Vi-

sions of the Dreamtime: The Art and Myth of Aboriginal Australia," and an articulated La Brea Tar Pits saber-toothed cat.

Museum hours are Tuesday through Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. There is a \$2 suggested donation, though admission is free for University students and museum members.

"Mingqi: Early Chinese Funerary Ceramics" is currently one of the featured exhibits at the Museum of Art, located at 1430 Johnson Lane. The exhibit includes a selection

of Chinese funerary tomb figures from the Han Dynasty (202 B.C. — 220 A.D.) through the Tang Dynasty (618 — 906 A.D.).

In the museum's Chinese Imperial Throne Room, the public can view works from the museum's collection of Imperial objects from the Qing Dynasty, including textiles, furniture, glass, ceramics and the largest jade pagoda outside China.

The museum also features a newly renovated wing of Japanese art, including a

changing print gallery with traditional wood-block prints. A second gallery offers highlights from the collections including Buddhist sculpture and painted screens.

Museum hours are noon to 8 p.m. Wednesday and noon to 5 p.m. Thursday through Sunday. There is a \$3 suggested admission charge, though admission is free for students, University employees and children, and museum members. For more information, call 346-3027.