

Perhaps you noticed them floating by in this year's Portland Pride Parade. Men dressed as colorful butterflies moving to a Latin beat beside others wearing tall lion masks decorated with feathers and mirrors and some with rumba silk shirts waving flags from Latin American countries.

They are one of the state's newest and fastest-growing queer groups, Poder Latino de Oregon, a social and educational organization that is an outgrowth of Cascade AIDS Project. *Willamette Week* certainly noticed them: They won first prize in the Pride float contest!

Their organization to pull together such an imaginative and beautiful float is even more impressive considering Poder Latino de Oregon only has been around for one year. Salvador Candela began the group as part of his position at CAP, where he does HIV prevention outreach to Latino men who have sex with men.

"It is unusual to be out in the Latino community," he says. "But last year we were a group of about 25, and now we have about 50 people! Of course, it took some effort and calls to get people interested, to make the meetings less boring. We have snacks and drinks, and we try to be open and social, not like a meeting."

Candela says he tries to keep the group's activities closely tied to Latino culture and roots. Besides creating fabulous parade floats, they also celebrate the Day of the Dead in October.

Candela tries to create a safe place for everybody because he knows Portland has a big population of Latino men who have sex with men but who do not identify as gay or bi. And the reason they have difficulty feeling good about being queer is as tangible as a tomato in the face.

PROUD LIONS AND BUTTERFLIES

Poder Latino de Oregon quickly makes its presence known

by Kim Stephenson



Poder Latino de Oregon won the *Willamette Week* float contest during Portland Pride 2002

"I think one of the main reasons I am in the United States is because I am gay," says Candela, who believes religion plays a big part in Latino homophobia. "It is hard to say 'I am gay' in Mexico. In my small hometown in

Mexico I never said to anybody that I was gay.

"My friends were gay and a little feminine, and other men would throw things in their face, whatever they had on hand. They called you names—awful names—right on the street or

anywhere you are. I went to the market one day with my friend who was a little fem, and everybody was throwing tomatoes at him—and me, because I was with him. And you think, 'I don't want to be like him, because that is going to happen to me.'"

Candela came to Portland 14 years ago; needless to say, it was a big change. He is lucky to have found acceptance in his family here and in the white world, but he still faces hostility from his larger culture.

"When I came here 14 years ago my aunt asked me if I was gay, and I answered, 'A little bit,'" Candela says. "And she said: 'No, you don't have to hide here. We hear some things about you, and it's OK to be gay here.'"

"I think one of the main reasons I am in the United States is because I am gay. It is hard to say 'I am gay' in Mexico."

—Salvador Candela

"So that was a big step for me, to have my family recognize I was gay and accept it. Here, I am accepted by the Anglo community and my family, but if I try to fit in with the larger Latino community here as a gay man it would be hard." □

PODER LATINO DE OREGON meets from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. every other Thursday at Outside In, 1132 S.W. 13th Ave. The next meeting is Aug. 8. For more information call 503-806-6416 or 503-871-7146.

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