



"The isolation that accompanied my gayness made me think how valuable it is to have allies"

—Tim Sweeney

"I think people make the choice for alliance based on their values, their capacity for empathy and their ability to understand why it is in their own interest to refuse racism. Too often, we get caught in a blame-and-shame game or in traps of guilt that are simply useless to the work of creating systemic change in a racist society.

"Becoming an ally to someone doesn't require a degree in international relations or rocket science. It requires an ability to listen, to empathize and to trust. It requires sufficient introspection to know what your values are and perhaps to change them. It requires a willingness to sacrifice privilege.

"And there's the rub. Too many white people will walk right to the edge of the cliff with us, but they're not jumping—not unless someone can guarantee them a safety net. Well, there are no guarantees. There can only be a resolute refusal to live this way anymore," Vazquez says.

According to Sweeney, anti-racism work and a larger agenda of social and economic justice benefit himself, his family and his community. "Part of my heritage was to be raised in a Catholic tradition of liberation theology that

sonal conversation back and forth called "A Rap on Race," in the spirit of James Baldwin and Margaret Meade's 1971 talk of the same name.

"Our dialogue and the one we hope all of you will engage in is about the necessity of forging personal and organizational alliances between people who live with and struggle against the terror—the humiliation and dehumanizing impact of racism in the United States—and those who are privileged by it," Vazquez says. "I don't believe anyone willingly chooses to be either a target or a perpetrator of racism. From birth, our race and class color our worldview and give or deny us privilege. The only choice we have is to stay in the cage or consciously to dismantle it.



Sue Hyde energizes volunteers during the first Creating Change 2002 Host Committee meeting Feb. 27

PHOTO BY MURPHY DAVIS

emphasized social and economic justice," he says. "I concretely experienced these values during the 1960s when the farmworkers' boycotts were highlighting the injustices of the farm labor system.

"I lived in rural Montana. I remember being exposed to farmworker living conditions—shacks with no running water, lack of health care, the difficulty of the physical labor in the sugar beet fields and, most importantly, the children's lack of education and schooling. I just couldn't understand how our society could ignore the plight of the people whose sweat and labor put the sugar on our tables.

"At some level I knew I was gay at a very early age. I couldn't believe the basic ignorance and assumptions about gay people. It made me really question authority and power because I couldn't understand who made up these assumptions, where people got their information and how the assumptions and information *did not* square with my reality at all. What I found so inspirational about farmworkers was their willingness to challenge a system that ignored or devalued them.

"My gayness gave me an appreciation for the complexity of the world, that all is not what it appears and the people who challenge the existing power structure and the 'common wisdom'—because of race or gender or class or sexual orientation—need to be listened to because they might have information and experience that I wouldn't know. The isolation that accompanied my gayness made me think how valuable it is to have allies," he says.

Keynote speaker Mandy Carter, one of the nation's leading African American lesbian activists, knows about the power of allies from her 39 years of organizing.

"We live in a society where we are interdependent on each other," she says. "We cannot obtain societal and legal wins without our allies—nongay, people of color, etc. A perfect example is the recent Sept. 10 vote in Miami, where the anti-gay forces wanted to repeal an existing anti-discrimination policy. A coalition of black and Latino groups and people came out in a very public way...and they turned out at the polls to defeat the anti-gay measure. This happened against the backdrop of the anti-gay

proponents using the faces and voices of a Latina woman and a black man! And they used the words of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to plead their anti-gay case.

"Let's not forget that the very same forces that are anti-gay are the exact same forces that are anti-people of color, anti-women, anti-poor and so on. And these forces are the ones that want to find ways to 'divide and conquer' us all. Our LGBT movement shouldn't fall into that trap by limiting our goal to the 'bottom line,' that it's all about being gay. How much longer can we identify as a single-issue movement that is 'just about being gay' as we struggle for equality and justice? Are we about justice or just us?" Carter asks.

"One of the most frequent questions we hear over and over again in our LGBT movement is, 'Why aren't there more people of color involved?' Yet, if we don't include an agenda of social and economic justice and freedom—the very issues that most directly impact communities of color—we should understand why they aren't involved!"

Vazquez adds: "We need to keep our eyes on the prize. The economic and ideological underpinnings of racism, sexism and enforced heterosexism or any other form of oppression are formidable foes. It is important to remember that bigots are each other's natural allies and that poverty—or the fear of it—has the power to seduce us all into conformity. 'Faggot' appears right next to 'nigger' and 'kike' in Castro Street graffiti. 'Queer lover' and 'fag hag' are cut from the same mold that gave us 'nigger lover.' A mold forged by fear of change and a loss of privilege.

"Unfortunately, our sacrifices to conformity rarely guarantee us the privilege or protection we were promised," she continues. "Those of us

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—Mandy Carter

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