

PEOPLE

Building bridges

Felipe Leon wants to be a big gay Latino brother to Portland's queer youth

BY ERIN SEXTON-SAYLER

Portlander Felipe Leon won the title of Mr. Gay Latino Oregon last summer and is working hard to serve his community while he reigns. The 22-year-old is fluent in English and Spanish and learning sign language while working as the clinic coordinator at Outside In.

"I am just someone who wants to have fun, who wants to learn from other cultures and experience what other people have experienced," says Leon. "I want to be a better person for myself and a better person for my community members."

According to pageant coordinator David Zambrano, the Mr. and Miss Gay Latino/Latina Pageant was started in 1998 by Carlos Torres, who owned then gay bar Exstasis. When he moved away in 2001, Zambrano took over the pageant, which grew into a statewide event.

The pageant is open to any Latino or Latina who wants to compete, and the titleholders are recognized by the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court. Mr. and Miss Gay Latino/Latina Oregon represent the Beaver State in the Queen and King of the Universe Pageant.

Leon is excited about the networking he is doing with other Mr. Gay Latinos across the United States. His counterparts in California and Washington have invited him to come visit, and he is eager to spread the word about the Oregon pageant and its mission.

"The purpose of these titleholders is to educate the community on how to become a Latino leader and role model, to network with other organizations to promote health and HIV prevention and to build bridges within other cultures," he explains, appearing to take this creed very seriously. "People expect you to be a role model 24 hours, seven days a week. Working here at Outside In...I do that." He enjoys it when patients recognize him as the titleholder and receives support from the clinic in his pageant role.

Mr. and Miss Gay Latino/Latina Oregon aren't the only official representatives from Portland and Oregon's queer Latino community. The organization Poder Latino de Oregon is also moving and shaking, "focusing on developing leadership...by organizing social, educational and HIV prevention events."

Leon and Zambrano are quick to acknowledge the tension that arose in June after an alleged miscommunication between Miss Gay Latina Oregon and Poder Latino surrounding her place on the organization's float during Portland Pride 2003.

Leon is committed to changing the way the public views their interactions. "All we can do is respect all other organizations, unite as much as we can, extend our welcome, open our doors and show support. We can hope for the best for them as well for us."

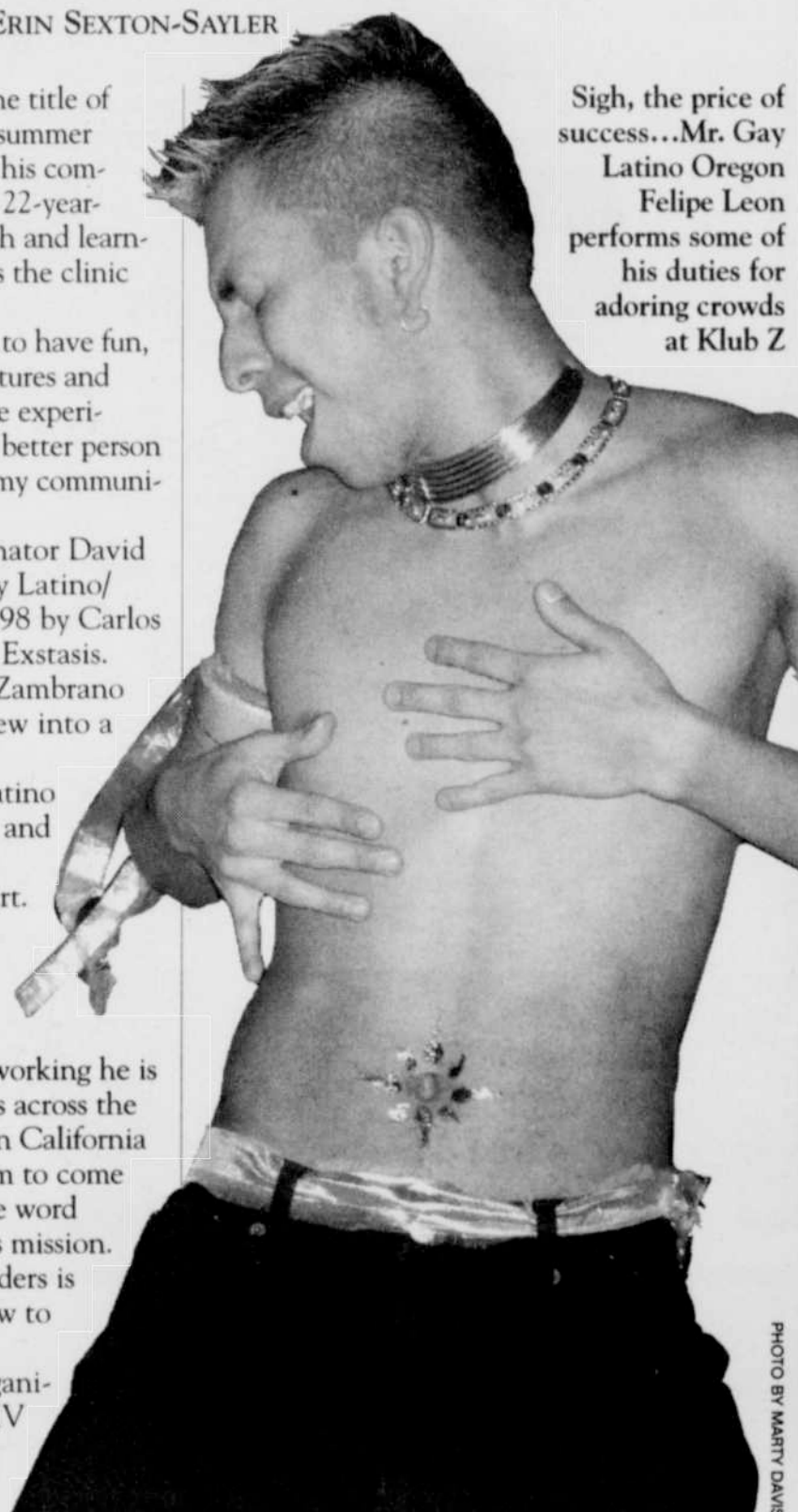


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Sigh, the price of success...Mr. Gay Latino Oregon Felipe Leon performs some of his duties for adoring crowds at Klub Z

Leon has several goals for his term. First, he is eager to show his appreciation to friends and family who have supported him along the way. He reports that his mother helps him with costumes and ideas for performances. He also wants to recognize the community organizations that have supported the pageant: Darcelle XV, Silverado, Scandals, Klub Z and Embers.

Leon also hopes to start providing support and mentoring to Latino/Latina high schoolers who are gay, lesbian, bi, trans or questioning. "I've seen that in the Latino community we need more of that offer 'I'm willing to help' or 'I am a resource.'"

Beginning early next year Leon would like to start a peer group that will be able to go out to high schools and organizations serving Latino and Latina youth and provide them with

resources such as phone numbers and information. "Kind of like the Big Brother program." □

ERIN SEXTON-SAYLER is the resident sassy ad dyke at Just Out.

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