

## northwest

## Rally for Equality

Queer community sees parallels between civil rights movements

by Jaymee R. Cuti

Immigration rights on the national agenda made it to Portland this month with a rally that drew hundreds to Terry Schunk Plaza.

The rally consisted primarily of students who walked out of school or arrived with their families at noon April 10. The demonstration was largely organized by students with the help of local immigrants rights groups. Participants gathered at the park through word of mouth, chanting "¡Sí, se puede!", a rally cry adopted from César Chávez's United Farm Workers union meaning, "Yes, we can!"

Participants were opposed by two lone protesters, who hung toward the back of the muddy park toting signs that read, "No" and "Illegals Go Home."

Some members of the sexual minorities community helped spread the word and stood with Latino immigrants in their fight for civil rights.

"It was beautiful to see our young people engaged in realizing that they have the constitutional right to assemble and exercise free speech," said Melanie Davis, a Latina lesbian who recruited the broader activist community to the rally. "It was nice to see the parents and grandparents and great-grandparents out for support. It was great to see the small children chanting and recognizing their future and the American dream."

The rally followed an immigration rights march attended by tens of thousands April 10 at the Oregon Capitol in Salem. That demonstration was supported and attended by members of Basic Rights Oregon. Similar rallies drew thousands to Pioneer

Courthouse Square on March 4 and downtown April 14.

"This has become our gay marriage issue," said Ramón Ramírez, president of Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United (PCUN), the state's farmworkers union. "In order for us to defend queer rights, we have to understand the nature of the oppression. It's the same thing for immigrants, understanding the complexity of the issues that we're facing."

The local protests are related to a national movement to resist House Bill 4437, dubbed the Border Protection, Antiterrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act, which would make being in the country illegally a felony, criminalize people who help illegal immigrants and build a 700-mile fence along the U.S.-Mexico border. The bill passed in the House on Dec. 16.

Sexual minority Latinos see many similarities between the queer and immigrant rights movements and have been building solidarity for more than a decade.

"In general, our communities have been silenced," said Davis, an advertising executive with Portland's *El Hispanic News*. She equates immigration issues to "don't ask, don't tell" policies faced by the queer community. "We shouldn't be policing our own friends, families and business colleagues."

Some activists see a need for all minority groups to unite to overcome a common enemy.

The Rev. Steve Witte is executive director of the Oregon Farm Worker Ministry, an education and advocacy group. "We connect people of faith with the farmworkers' struggle for justice and educate communities of conscience to the fact that every day, our life is touched by a farmworker."

Witte, who is gay, spoke at the April 10 rally and recently testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee in Washington, D.C., for a more humane immigration bill. "It's the same narrow-minded people that are in power that keep both communities down. Instead of allowing groups like the religious right to splinter us into different communities, I would love to see more interaction in the two communities."



Hundreds rallied at Terry Schunk Plaza in support of immigrant rights.

David Martinez, policy and constituent relations manager for Multnomah County Commissioner Maria Rojo de Steffey, also sees overlap in the movements.

"There are a lot of parallels when a community is disenfranchised, when it's scapegoated. You look at a lot of messages that are out there: undocumented workers affecting the economy, resources, issues within the schools. You look at attacks that the queer community has been facing, not just from gay marriage but from equal benefits to protections within the workplace. You look at the same rationale that these groups are attacked based on stereotypes, misinformation and fear," said Martinez, a gay Latino.

Ruben Rivera is a Portland-based immigration rights attorney and board member of Immigration Equality, a national gay and lesbian immigrant rights group. He explained some of the obstacles faced by undocumented sexual minority Latinos.

"Immigration Equality is one of the many organizations that has advocated for same-sex couples and binational couples because currently immigration law does not allow a same-sex partner to be sponsored by a same-sex partner," said Rivera, who is gay and Latino. "The queer community also faces specific obstacles with people who are HIV-positive coming into the U.S."

Rivera said, "The government does not recognize our families for immigration purposes and does not recognize our relationships."

Ramírez has long seen the connection between Latino immigrants and queers. In 2005, he was honored with BRO's Fighting Spirit Award.

"A lot of the folks you are talking about, members of the queer community, are hardworking people. They have families, they pay taxes, they

contribute to the makeup of the community," he said. Ramírez could have just as easily been describing undocumented workers.

PCUN and BRO formed a coalition through fighting discriminatory ballot measures aimed at their respective communities. During the Measure 36 campaign, PCUN members canvassed Spanish-language anti-discrimination material throughout Oregon's Latino neighborhoods.

"We're looking to follow the lead of our coalition partners and support in any way we can by providing resources, education and organizing activities," said Rebekah Kassell, a spokeswoman for BRO.

Ramírez admits that despite coalition-building efforts between the two minority groups, more work needs to be done. "It's still an emerging relationship with the queer community. The Latino community, for the most part, is homophobic, so we have a lot of work to do in education and why it's important to be for the rights of all people, including queers."

According to Ramírez, the agenda is set from the top, and he makes a point to speak about queer equality at every public event he attends.

"I'm in a position to influence people, and I feel like it's my responsibility to show leadership in supporting our gay, lesbian and transgender brothers and sisters. That's what allies are there for, right?" Ramírez said. "I'm going to defend queer rights 'til the day I die."

The next action planned to support immigrants is May 1, titled "Un Día Sin Mexicanos (A Day Without Mexicans)." Participants are encouraged to not attend work or school and to abstain from patronizing businesses that employ Latinos but do not pay adequately or respect fair labor practices. ☐



Melanie Davis, a Latina lesbian, helped spread word about the rally to the activist community.

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