

A day of action and hope in answering the call to serve

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During the presidential campaign, Latinos declared, "Today we march, tomorrow we vote," says Francisco Lopez, Director of Oregon's Immigrant Rights Coalition CAUSA. "We voted. We are sending him [Obama] the invoice." Last November, two-thirds of the record-setting 10 million voting Latinos cast a ballot for Barack Obama, who committed to pass comprehensive immigration if elected.

On Feb. 28, Chemeketa Community College in Salem hosted the Immigrant Action Day, sponsored by the Salem-based CAUSA and the Chemeketa Community College Chapter of Latinos Unidos Siempre (LUS). Four hundred and fifty people registered at the door. "I'm here to help out somehow," says Jose Gonzalez of Portland, applause erupting in the background, the crowd spontaneously breaking into a chant of "si se puede (yes, we can)." Oregon State Rep. Terry Beyer D-Springfield, told the audience she will support a state resolution in favor of comprehensive immigration reform. The schedule also offered workshops on a variety of immigrant rights topics: Driver's licenses, comprehensive immigration reform, legal rights, education, and organizing for the annual May 1 march on the Capitol. "I am here to support the rights for driver's licenses and equality for all Americans including those who are not considered documented," says Anastasia Hernandez-Vasquez, who made the trip from Hillsboro, "This country was built on immigration."

A different narrative reared its head on the edge of campus. At the college gates, 12 men wearing jeans, baseball caps, mustaches, and sunglasses stood with signs opposing rights for "illegal" immigrants and their employers. They claimed membership in the Minutemen and Oregonians for Immigration Reform organizations. "They're in there teaching them how to get a license. Well, legal immigrants already can. So it's only for illegal aliens," says Rick Hickey, vice president of OFIR. "They're in there and they want comprehensive immigration reform."

Around noon, seven demonstrators entered the events building. Security warned the group to refrain from disruptive behavior inside the building, according to a Chemeketa public safety officer. The group stood and watched for a while before leaving. Greg Delgado, the Latino Community Coordinator for Central

Oregon's branch of Jobs with Justice commented, "If they had any sense of what was happening. They would open dialogue to find a solution. Not set up outside and complain about it," he says. "This is an issue that is affecting all of us. I am born a U.S. citizen. I think we are all affected by this immigration issue."

Across the parking lot, Hickey trumpeted warnings to all Americans. "Every single person in America has got to realize that your job is next. Your employer thinks you're a spoiled lazy American and you want too much damn money and you want too many benefits," he says. "Your employer can hire an illegal alien that's thrilled to get minimum wage and doesn't care about doctor's bills. Your job is gone. And it's bankrupting this country." When questioned whom he blames, Hickey says, "I blame the employers a hundred percent. I blame George W. Bush."

Inside the event, leaders analyzed the issue from a wider and more detailed perspective. "Globalization, free trade, these are issues that cause these problems. These people are not here because they want to be here but it is because we are forcing them out to survive" Delgado says. "So we have to look at all aspects of it." Referring to the opponents of comprehensive reform demonstrating outside, Delgado says they should bring a detailed discussion, a dialogue, to be part of the solution. "If you are ready to march about it, you better be ready to talk about it, to bring a dialogue, to be prepared to understand this is not just our problem. This is everyone's problem."

Francisco Lopez, the Day of Action emcee, describes the root causes of the immigration issue as threefold: 1) environmental degradation 2) lack of respect for labor laws 3) and the attack on and elimination of labor unions. Lopez traveled to El Salvador two years ago and recalls visiting "a river that used to be the livelihood for nearly 30,000 people." That changed when Kimberly Clark, the giant manufacturer of Kleenex and other paper products, and an opponent of comprehensive immigration reform, "started dumping its chemicals in the river," he says. The pollution contaminated the water, killing the fish. The workers fought back and began to organize, only to be violently repressed by the El Salvadorian government with support from the U.S. government, Kimberly Clark, and other corporations that use slave wages and non-

existent environmental and labor regulations to turn greater profits. The government's repression, coupled with the lack of hope of providing sustenance for their families, forced many of the men along the river to migrate from their beloved birthplace to the United States. "We must renegotiate NAFTA and CAFTA," Lopez says. The free trade agreements are "advantageous for wealthier countries to take advantage of poorer countries," says Delgado. "If you want NAFTA, make sure it balances out. But it's not that way. It is a very unfair policy."

Luz Maria Ventura, a U.S. citizen, drove from Bend to learn more about issues relating to immigration, such as NAFTA and CAFTA, and to give an ongoing contribution to the movement. For Ventura, education is the antidote to prejudice and the best hope to create communities where all residents, documented or undocumented, are treated with equal respect and dignity. "We need to get out there and educate our neighbors, not just ourselves as Hispanics," she says. "We need to get our families, who need reform, to go to the march, but we also need to educate our neighbors, who are not Hispanics; our teachers, and people at church. We need to learn English so we can speak to everyone who doesn't know where we come from and who we are, to understand us."

20 years ago, Jose Gonzalez's parents, undocumented immigrants from Mexico, became U.S. citizens. Born in Portland, Gonzalez grew up with a foot in both worlds. "I've seen both sides growing up in the American culture, but at home I lived the Mexican way," he says. When asked what he feels about the dozen demonstrators standing at the college entrance, he replies, "I really feel that if both sides communicated a little better with each other, we would all reach the same point. Both sides want a better America." This wish for a better America, for all residents, motivated Gonzalez and other participants to show up and say, "I am here to help out somehow."

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— GREG DELGADO
JOBS WITH JUSTICE, CENTRAL OREGON

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BY JULIE MARTIN



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