

Painful Humor

EW asked to stop running '¡Ask a Mexican!'

Shortly after *Eugene Weekly* began running the satirical advice column, "¡Ask a Mexican!" in the Nov. 8 issue, letters to the editor began pouring in, nearly all demanding that *EW* stop printing the weekly syndicated column. Letters this week are more varied.

Is Eugene ready for this ethnic and political satire? Local Latino leaders fear Eugeneans lack the context to learn from the humor, especially as the immigration debate heats up. For instance, Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski recently signed an order that makes it dramatically more difficult for illegal immigrants to get a driver's license (for more, see page 19).

"¡Ask a Mexican!" is written by Orange County, Calif.-based Gustavo Arellano and syndicated across the country from California to New York and many places in between, like Tulsa, Okla., by Village Voice Media (see cover story last week). The column has won national awards and Arellano has been featured by NPR, *The Today Show*, *Utne*, *Nightline* and *The Colbert Report*. The column has also inspired knock-offs from the online blog "Ask a Korean!" (askakorean.blogspot.com) to *Anchorage Press*' controversial and failed attempt to create "Ask an Eskimo!"

On Nov. 28, *EW* Editor Ted Taylor and paper co-owner and board member Anita

Johnson met with approximately 18 concerned community leaders, including City Councilors Andrea Ortiz and Mike Clark, UO Vice Provost Charles Martinez (who is also chair of the 4J School Board) and heads of local social service agencies, many of which focus on Eugene's Latino community.

The goal of the meeting, said Centro Latino Americano (CLA) Executive Director Jorge Navarro, who hosted the gathering, was "about creating dialogue."

Among the concerns that were discussed at the meeting was the issue of context, as well as concerns about the often-ribald language Arellano employs. In past columns Arellano has used Spanish slang like *puta*, which Carmen Urbina, a long-time Latina advocate in Eugene, called, "worse than a whore."

Urbina also pointed to Arellano's use of the phrase "*un nopal en la frente*," which roughly translates to "a cactus growing from the forehead." This phrase is used by U.S. Mexicans to describe other Mexicans "fresh from the border," according to Arellano.

"Reading this column, seeing those words, do you know what this means?" asked Urbina. "It hits to the core of demeaning stereotypes," she said.

"This is giving this community permission to use this language in the context of snark and comedy," Urbina said. "Our chil-

dren can't deal with this. I have to explain hate," she said.

Urbina works with Mujeres Latinas, a group of 135 Latina women, some of whom she says were driven to tears when shown the column.

"This column doesn't have a place in this community," said Guadalupe Quinn, CAUSA Lane County regional coordinator.

"We don't have the luxury that California does — they have the previous knowledge of the language and the culture," said Juan Carlos Valle, one of CLA's board members.

protesting outside Mexican restaurants owned by Mexicans who use similar caricatures?"

"There is no balance" to running the column, commented Ortiz, who cited concerns that *EW* and other media do not feature enough reporting on Latino issues. Some community members also asked about the lack of local Latino voices in the paper. Taylor and Johnson extended an invitation to the Latino community to write regular columns for *EW*.

Taylor reminded the gathering of *EW*'s

'This column doesn't have a place in this community.'

—Guadalupe Quinn, CAUSA Lane County Regional Coordinator

"Keep in mind, we're in Oregon," he added.

Johnson, who is also a contributing editor to *EW*, said the paper's editorial board decided to run the column because they saw it "as a way of combating racism and stereotyping." Arellano himself has stated in numerous interviews that the goal of the column, including the caricature of a gold-toothed sombrero-wearing Mexican with a mustache, "is to debunk the stereotypes that people do have about Mexicans, to aggressively go after racists" (*EW* 11/29).

Arellano, in response to criticisms of the caricature, asked: "Are these same activists

subsidizing the printing and inserting of the Spanish-language paper *El Norte* in *EW* for about nine months in 2005. *EW* was unable to continue *El Norte* due to a lack of advertising support. Only one letter to the editor supported the effort, and none noted the cessation of *El Norte* in *EW*, Taylor said.

Toward the end of the more than one-hour meeting, several members of the group demanded an immediate decision on whether or not to stop publishing "¡Ask a Mexican!" Johnson said she alone could not make that decision and promised to report to the board about the meeting.

EW



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