

# Civil Rights Begin with Education

## Immigrants learn solidarity makes a citizen

BY RAYMOND RENDELMAN  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Martin Luther King Jr. wanted one aspect of the civil-rights movement soon eradicated, but never forgotten: the so-called Citizenship Schools that he and Septima Clark made to flourish throughout the Deep South, where segregationists had forced aspiring African-American voters to demonstrate "constitutional interpretation" capabilities before they were allowed to cast ballots.

Inhumanity of this magnitude has disappeared with revised laws, but parallels remain.

Antonio Gonzalez, an academic support coordinator for the Oregon Council for Hispanic Advancement, echoes the spiritual and legal emancipation that Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil-rights leaders envisioned coming with education.

"The more you learn, the freer you are," Gonzalez says.

Citing census statistics that show two out of five Hispanics over 25 have not graduated from high school, the council endeavors to develop mentoring relationships with young people and create opportunities for their families' life-skill development.

By sending folks like Gonzalez to schools citywide, the organization provides English classes, help in improving academic achievement, preventive health-care information and job-interview preparation.

In addition to four weekly after-school sessions lasting two hours, Gonzalez keeps a caseload of Latino students that have been identified as struggling. He sees parental connection as the most important factor in determining student success, so he tries to split time evenly among homework issues, acculturation and learning about Hispanic heritage.

Being an Afro Cuban in the U.S. puts Gonzalez



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Antonio Gonzalez, academic support coordinator for the Oregon Council for Hispanic Advancement, works with families in Portland Public Schools.

in a unique position to address civil-rights and solidarity issues.

Experiencing racism here has surprised him since he considers himself "from a country where the color of your skin really doesn't matter."

He finds that his ethnic background sometimes triggers a barrier with black Americans,

and that even though his skin is black, he can relate to Hispanic people more.

He combines his Cuban background with work here to create his own way of thinking.

"In Cuba, as long as you have the IQ and the grades, you will move forward," he says, acknowledging flaws in the Cuban system. "I love my country because I was born there, but it has


issues like anywhere else."

Gonzalez tries to pacify competing political forces by integrating values of respected American organizers with the likes of Jose Marti, who earned status as a Cuban national hero by leading its independence movement.

"Marti and MLK have a lot of ideas in common," he says.

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THEIR IDEAS AND EXPERIENCES  
ARE THE RICHES OF A COMMUNITY.

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