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Often shunned by family, Oregon's gay Latinos fight for respect

By Gosia Wozniacka, The Oregonian

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When 16-year-old Edna Vazquez of Colima, Mexico, fell in love with a young woman, her parents ran her out of the house. They sent Vazquez to live with relatives in Oregon, hoping a separation from her girlfriend would save their only daughter and the family honor.

At first, Vazquez -- who had known she was gay since childhood -- felt like a fish in water. She joined the club for gay youths at Century High School in Hillsboro. She reveled in the sight of same-sex couples publicly holding hands. Oregon seemed so unlike Colima, where she had been singled out, ridiculed, even fired from a job for being gay.

But the bubble quickly burst. As family in Mexico continued to repudiate her, so did fellow Latinos in Oregon. Through sideways glances and snide remarks, Vazquez understood that the Portland area, known as a haven for gay and transgender folks, offered her little refuge.

"Emotionally, I felt like I was back in Mexico," said Vazquez, now 31, who is one of several individuals and organizations working to break through taboos on homosexuality in the Latino community.

"Latinos here see us with fear or with compassion, but never as equals," she said. "They think something is wrong with us."

Latino culture includes rigid gender roles and a preoccupation with masculinity known as "machismo," said Rafael M. Díaz, professor at the Cesar Chavez Institute at San Francisco State University.

"Among Latinos, homosexuality is understood as a problem with your gender, and there is a lot of shame connected with that," Díaz said. "The Latino culture is obsessed with the question, 'Are you a man or a woman?'"

For years, Vazquez struggled with accepting herself as a lesbian Latina. She battled shame and isolation, turning to self-destructive behavior, including a suicide attempt.

"For my parents, it was disgusting. It killed them that I wasn't a woman who was going to get married," Vazquez said. "Their fear was that people would find out they had a lesbian daughter and shame the family name."

Many hide their sexuality

Because more Latino sexual minorities call Oregon home, their plight has become urgent, said Dañel Malán, artistic director of Portland-based Teatro Milagro and co-founder of the Latino Sexual Health Coalition.

Many Latino gays hide their orientation from other Latinos, Malán said, and they're not visible in the mainstream gay community.

Some gay Latinos are told they are failures as men or women, Díaz said. Some families say their disapproval is based on wanting to protect their children from growing up alone, being harassed or contracting HIV.



Courtesy of EDNA
VAZQUEZ

Edna Vazquez fought to gain respect as a female member of Los Palmeros mariachi band. As a lesbian Latina, she struggled for years to find acceptance within the Latino community. She now hopes to support other gay Latinos in their journey and help break the taboos around homosexuality.

There is some recent acceptance in Latin America: Mexico City legalized same-sex marriage in December; Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador allow civil unions. But prejudice remains high, with several generations caught in between, Díaz said.

Many gay Latinos feel they must leave home, but that's a "geographic pseudo-cure," Díaz said.

"Some Latinos come to the United States in order to find a more acceptable way to live their homosexuality," Díaz said. "But those who have not received the family blessing remain conflicted. It creates a split because family is very important in the Latino community."

And Latino gays must get used to a double-minority status, Díaz said. They may face prejudice based on ethnicity or skin color from the mainstream culture and prejudice for being gay from their own ethnic group. "Coming out" means risking not only rejection from family and community, but also the loss of a refuge, a mainstay of familiarity and assistance in a new country.

"Gay Latinos constantly struggle with multiple identities, trying to be accepted for all the aspects of who they are," said Marysol Asencio, a professor at the University of Connecticut. "Some say, I have two strikes against me, because I'm Latino and gay. Can I be both? What does that mean in terms of my ability to access resources, to feel supported and included?"

Most struggle with identity

Vazquez moved to Oregon in 1997, as the gay community in the state was gaining momentum after the defeat of countless state and local anti-gay measures.

As Vazquez learned English and worked minimum-wage jobs, she was mocked by fellow Latinos, called hateful names and interrogated about her intimate life. The Spanish-language television programs she watched perpetuated stereotypes about gays, she said. Vazquez started to drink heavily and attempted suicide.

"For me, being gay and Latino was a trauma that I had to overcome," Vazquez said.

Few safe spaces exist for gay Latinos. At Embers, a nightclub on Northwest Broadway, couples sway to salsa and cumbia during Latino gay night late Sunday evenings. But when Vazquez meets gay Latino friends at a gay bar, some whisper to her: "Don't tell anyone that you saw me here!"

Many Latinos don't identify with being gay, said David Zambrano, a Multnomah County community health specialist who does outreach in Rockwood to talk about sexuality and disease prevention.

"They say, 'Oh, I was just with that man, but I'm not gay,'" Zambrano said.

Vazquez didn't want to hide; and she didn't want to be ridiculed. She realized she needed to prove the stereotypes wrong. In 2004, she checked herself into a rehab clinic and remains sober. She is completing an associate's degree in education at Mt. Hood Community College.



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Courtesy of Edna Vazquez

Edna Vazquez is a member of the Los Palmeros Mariachi band. As a lesbian Latina, she struggled for years to find acceptance within the Latino community. She now hopes to support other gay Latinos in their journey and help break the taboos around homosexuality.

Vazquez also rediscovered her talent: a deep, low-timbre voice. She joined a mariachi band, a traditionally male genre, and battled to gain the respect of fellow musicians. She now sings and plays guitar professionally.

She hopes to help others on their journey.

"I want Latinos to understand that we are human beings, that they shouldn't treat us differently," Vazquez said. "I hope people can let go of their fear and that our community understands that homosexuality is nothing wrong."

Trying to break taboos

To support gay Latinos such as Vazquez, several groups are raising community awareness.

"American Sueño," which premiered Friday at Teatro Milagro, tells the stories of four marginalized immigrant Latinos -- gay, lesbian and transgender -- as they struggle between living with their family traditions and searching for their identities.

Written by local playwright Rebecca Martínez, it is based on anonymous stories collected at community forums and from the actors, all of whom are gay or transgender.

They are the stories of real Oregon Latinos: a gay man who committed suicide; others who were told they are diseased and need to be fixed; homeless gay teens disowned by their parents; and gay businessmen who lead double lives in order not to lose customers.

The message of the play, which will tour Oregon cities and schools, "is that we just want to be people and we want to be accepted. And we want to be able to talk about it," Malán said.

Last month, several gay Latino leaders in Portland formed the first social and educational group for gay Latinos in the metro area. The group, SOMOS, hopes to provide a safe meeting space for gay



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Motoya Nakamura/The Oregonian

Joaquin Lopez, rehearses for the upcoming play, which premiered at Teatro Milagro (Miracle Theatre) in Southeast Portland. The play tells the story of marginalized Latino

Latinos and connect people to resources. The group plans an anti-homophobia campaign.

immigrants who are in search of a national and sexual identity.

"We want to be part of the social change so our rights and dreams can be respected," said Cesar Pecori, one of the group's founders. "We want to help break the stigma of being gay among Latinos."

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