NEWS

ENLACE makes history in the annual Latino festival

by Lisa Sragovicz

Members of the D.C. Metropolitan Area Coalition of Lesbian and Gay Latinos (ENLACE) stunned crowds when they marched down Constitution Avenue on Sunday, July 31, as the first openly Gay contingent to march in the 23-year history of the Latino Festival parade.

It was an historic first, said Don Miguel Crisostomo, recorder for ENLACE.

"Visibility is everything. We wanted to tell them we're there and let them see us," he added.

ENLACE members were initially concerned about the reaction from the crowd because, Crisostomo said, many Latinos have a strong Catholic background, and some are threatened by homosexuality.

The group marched without any major problems from the crowd, members said, but they did march at the very end of the parade.

The political organizations marched first, followed by contingents from various Latin countries. Eight independent organizations, including ENLACE, were scheduled to follow. On the day of the parade, however, the other seven independent groups all mixed in with the various countries, leaving ENLACE at the end of the parade, behind a contingent from Uruguay.

"Whether this was planned, I don't know," Crisostomo said.

Another coincidence that ENLACE members couldn't explain was the parade marshal who asked ENLACE to march farther back from Uruguay's float.

"Maybe he thought we were crowding them," ENLACE President Letitia Gomez speculated.

The audience cheered loudly in response to Uruguay's musical float, with its drummers and dancers, Crisostomo said.

Many onlookers grew quiet when they saw ENLACE's banner and contingent of nine people, walking, driving, and holding signs like Ric Mendoza's. Mendoza, a 62-year-old D.C. resident, held a sign that read, "Gay veteran, Gay Latino, Gay senior."

Some onlookers booed. Some also cheered. A couple yelled and had to be restrained by a police officer, and some grandmotherly-looking types waved from their seats on the curb with their children, Gomez recounted. The overall reaction was mixed, she said.

by Doug Hinckle

Marching in the parade, ENLACE President Letitia Gomez said, "is something that I personally have always wanted ENLACE to do."

Some other festival participants asked parade coordinator Dario Dos Santos to remove ENLACE from the parade, but he refused. Carmen Ramirez, executive director of the D.C. Office of Latino Affairs, also stood up for ENLACE when people challenged ENLACE's right to march, said Gomez. Gomez added that she was glad ENLACE had these friends in the Latino community.

Last year at the Festival, ENLACE members helped register voters. The group has also served the larger Latino community in other ways, and "for that we are very proud," Crisostomo added.

ENLACE held a fund-raiser at the Adams Morgan bar El Faro later Sunday night for HOLA GAY, the bilingual hotline. Gomez announced to fund-raiser participants that ENLACE members had marched in the Latino festival earlier in the day.

"Everybody seemed to be very proud," Crisostomo recalled.

Gomez added that the group raised $200 to pay for advertising for HOLA GAY.

Marching in the parade, Gomez said, "is something that I personally have always wanted ENLACE to do."

"We will be in it next year," Gomez stated. Gomez said she hopes the contingent will have more people next year, not just Gay people, she said, and definitely with more of a reaction.▼

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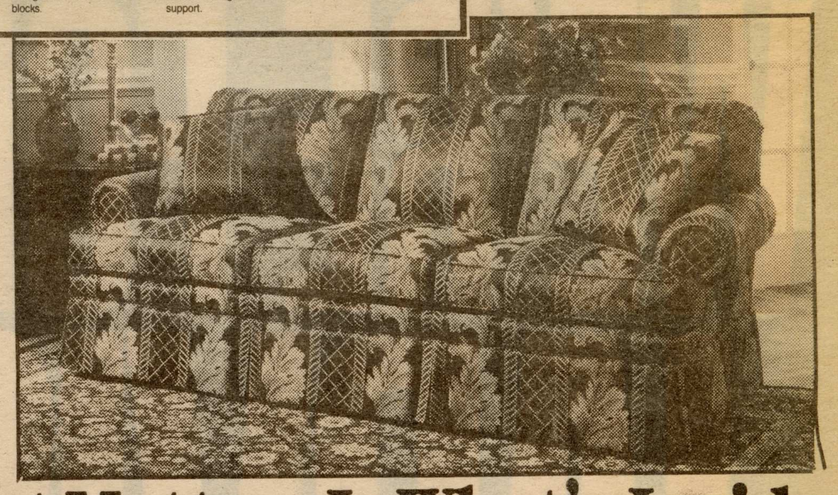

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