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Diálogando: Amigas Latinas

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Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

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Amigas Latinas Lesbianas/Bisexuals is an education, support and discussion group that provides a safe space and opportunities for lesbian, bisexual and questioning women of Latina heritage who live in the Chicago area to gather, celebrate and explore their identity and potential as mothers, daughters, partners, sisters, aunts, comadres, and friends. The membership consists of about 120 women. The diversity of the membership spans the range from third-generation, monolingual English speakers to recently-arrived, monolingual Spanish speaking immigrant women. Recently, I spoke to Evette Cardona, one of the founding members of Amigas, about the origins and work of this group. Here are excerpts of our conversation.

**Marissa:** Evette, could you tell me a little bit about how Amigas started?

**Evette:** Amigas was born really as a result of my own coming out process. When I eventually came out, I guess, to myself and to the rest of the community, I quickly got involved in organizing because part of my personal task was to find other Latina Lesbian. And so in that process through a very good friend, we started an organization called Women of All Colors and Cultures Together (WACC). That started in May of 1994 and it was a very multicultural group. It was an attempt to see if we could kind of create a space where women of all colors and cultures could come together. It was a Lesbian organization and there were four organizers, an Anglo woman, myself, a Chinese woman from mainland China, and an African American woman, and my task was to find other Latina women. A year after starting Women of All Colors and Cultures Together, I finally met other Latin women—especially Juanita and a couple other women—and we launched an organization for Latina lesbians. It was July 15th, 1995. We followed the (WACC) model where we would start to meet in different women’s homes throughout the City and do a potluck. We started to talk about topics because it was a smaller group. The WACC brunches had grown to 70-80 women a month, and you just couldn’t really have a discussion. We had 10, 15, maybe 50, so we could still talk about familia, identity, and what it means to be a Latina and lesbian and bisexual.

Five years later, we are still doing these brunches. We also do some workshops now that are a little bit more intense around relationships, legal issues or health issues. We do family activities because it’s very important that a lot of the women who are mothers or who are aunts raising their nieces and nephews have a space to bring their children so that it normalizes it for them—for the moms, and the aunts, the Amigas, as well as normalizes for the children. This is important because a lot of women are dealing with custody issues—very intense custody battles—it’s really important to let children know we’re just as boring as everybody else. We provide these opportunities to let them see that there are other children that live in Lesbian households like my mom’s or my aunt’s, and that’s okay.

We also do social activities because it’s very important in our community and any other Les/bi/gay/trans communities to create social spaces where people can get together and just be who they are and celebrate who they are. We’re getting to the point where we need to start raising more money for...
what we are doing. Our mailing list and the things we want to
do is growing. We want to advertise some of our events and
that takes money and passing the hat isn’t really cutting it
anymore. So we are in the process of trying to get our 501C3
status and become a full fledged non-profit organization.
I think Juanita and I used to always talk about how we could
lay the torch down at any time and we would have been
happy and pleased with the work we had done for the
community. That’s not good enough anymore. I don’t want to
lay it down. We are clearly filling a gap in the community that
the more mainstream gay and lesbian organizations aren’t
able to respond to because of language and culture, and that
the Latino-serving organizations aren’t able, ready, or maybe
willing to respond to because of the sexuality issues.

**Mariessa: Could you say more about why these organizations
aren’t or can’t fulfill the needs of Latina lesbians, and
Bisexuals?**

**Evette:** It’s always been an issue, probably, in the gay
community because of diversity issues. Certainly the sexual
identity issue and the challenges we face from society because
of our sexual identity links us together, but to be gay, white
male in society versus Latina, lesbian, single mom, you know,
it’s all these different layers. For the white gay community, a
lot of us feel that there’s a dominant culture that they can tap
into even if they’re ostracized from their own family. When
you’re Latina, when you’re African American and you’re
ostracized from your family, you can’t really tap into your
culture either, because of cultural taboos in the African
American and in the Latino community around gays and
lesbians. So there’s the gap and we’re seeing it. In the last
year, year and a half, we’re seeing an increase in Spanish-
speaking women, Spanish language dominant or monolingual
Spanish. A lot of immigrant women that are here three
months or three years, but that the language that they’re
comfortable with is Spanish. They think in Spanish, they
dream in Spanish, they love in Spanish. And a lot of the
mainstream gay organizations don’t even have bilingual staff,
let alone bicultural, and so they refer people to us. I’m talking
about millions of dollars in their budget, and they refer
people to our little group that as of right now barely has a
five-thousand dollar budget.

We recognize that we’re not clinicians, and that we’re not
mental health providers, but we’re certainly providing more
than anybody else including the Latino-serving organizations
that have been around for decades. They are not serving gays
and lesbians. They either don’t know it, don’t realize it, don’t
affirm it, or don’t want to acknowledge it. So, if a Latina
women goes for counseling for any other issue they’re able to
deal with it, but if a woman discloses that she’s also Lesbian or
she’s dealing with sexual identity issues, then it’s kind of like,
“Ooo, well, we’re not sure how to handle that, so why don’t
you call this group Amigas Latinas,” and once again, this poor
woman gets caught in this vicious cycle of getting passed
around. We’re just a group of very impassioned volunteers.
You know, we all have day jobs and yet our monthlyunches
have created safe intimate spaces for women to just be with
their own. Some of them come once and then they don’t come
back for a year or so. Then they come again and we’re still
there, and that’s important. Others come very regularly. We’ve
probably encountered about 200 women which, on the one
hand, isn’t a lot, but on the other hand, it is. We probably mail
flyers to about 125 women monthly. There’s probably a core
group of about 40 or 50. That’s not too bad, so that’s why
we’re really seriously looking at where we’re going with this
and how to leverage and advocate other social service groups
to step up to the plate and recognize that they have to deal
with these Latina lesbians whether they speak English or not.

**Mariessa:** How do you think you might do that? What kind of
things and organizations will you be turning to?

**Evette:** One of the things we have found that I think people
will agree with on the committee is that there’s a need for
mental health counseling, whether it’s intensive one on
one counseling, peer counseling, or counseling around
specific topics such as domestic violence, sexual assault, or
identity issues.

So, if there aren’t a lot of Latina lesbian therapists out there—
there’s only a few that we know of—then we need to identify
Spanish-speaking providers and educate them about Lesbian
issues and where those two identities merge—the Latina and
the lesbian or the bisexual or the questioning woman who
may just be thinking about it. I want to get five to ten
therapists that we can refer people to because we get
together, we have these intense discussions where a lot of
things might get dredged up and where does this woman
go? Until the next month when we get together, she may not
have anywhere else to go. At times the following month we
may be discussing a totally different topic or if it’s summer
time and in place of a discussion, we do a social activity, then
she may not have anywhere else to go. At times the following month we
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she may not have anywhere else to go.
Maybe they don’t have sexual orientation in their employment discrimination policy. I mean, that’s a big deal. That says a lot if you do. Maybe one day... you know, a lot of diversity training that happens now, totally disregards sexuality. You deal with race, you deal with class, you know, ableism, ageism, but nobody’s touching the final frontier which is sexual orientation. We’re going to try to do some training with Latino serving organizations. I want to put the rainbow flag right up there with the Mexican flag and Puerto Rican flag in the window so that people know that this is a welcoming place. Management in these Latino serving organizations may be cool with it, but it doesn’t mean the individual provider, the counselor is. That’s a whole other ethical thing that as a provider, as a social worker, ethically you have to help people and... but some people aren’t there yet, so it’s a process—an educating process—that we’ve undergone now that we want to do because nobody else is doing it.

_Maniessa: So Amigas as an organization is starting to do that work?

Evette: It’s a plan for me. You know, we’ve always thought we’re not the experts. Again, we’re volunteers that have responded to a need, and yet nobody else is doing it. So we are experts. We get called as to how do you work with these women... and it reminds me of probably 30-40 years ago they were saying the same thing about Latinos. How do we work with Latinos? We can’t understand them. It’s a whole different culture and the way I think about it is if I’m trained as a social worker and I’m there when the person’s there, depending whether they’re male, female, white, black, whatever, I have to be able to listen, and then I have to educate myself if there’s something I need to know, and that’s what we want people to do.