2002

Diálogando: Amigas Latinas

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Recommended Citation
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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 woman 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 monthly brunches 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 fliers 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 may be discussing a totally different topic. So, if the next month when we get together, we’re finding that we’ve really helped act as a bridge for them. You know, they gain our trust and understanding and come to know there’s somebody I can talk to one-on-one. Our brunches are now pulling in like 25, 30, 35 women and again, especially if you’re coming new to the group, there’s no real chance for you to talk. You can talk about the particular topic, maybe how it relates to you, but depending where you’re at with your process, it’s not like a small support group. So for women that really need more one-on-one time to discuss their issues, we’re putting together an awareness training workshop for May where we’re trying to identify peer counselors, therapists at the Latino-serving organizations and anyone else that’s got a counseling department to educate them about issues facing Latina lesbians. This will also give us the opportunity to find out if maybe they are working effectively with Latina lesbians and we just don’t know about it, so we also need to find out for ourselves.

We also want the Horizons and Howard Browns—the mainstream gay and lesbian groups—to also provide counselors for these women that don’t speak English. The Latino cultural piece is also very important for them to understand, whether it’s issues of how folk medicine comes into play, or familia which in the white-dominant culture isn’t really the same. We need to educate both groups—the Latino serving organizations and the mainstream gay and lesbian organizations because Latina lesbian bisexual women cannot separate these identities, but they’re often asked to. When you go to a gay event you might be one of a handful of even three or four Latinos and you go to the Latino event and it’s not like everybody’s walking around wearing their rainbow flag. I mean, they may be gay, but they may not be out. Nobody may know and so do I approach this person? We often get kind of caught where we don’t belong. There’s a piece of us that doesn’t belong depending on the circles we’re
in. We walk into an Amigas event it’s like—wow—you’ve come home, which is great. So, the other thing that we’ve done to address that is to start a Spanish-speaking support group. We really believe that we’re the first Spanish-speaking support group for Latina lesbians in Chicago. That’s been real important because, again, these women really can’t go anywhere else. They may go to a Latino-serving organization to speak the language, but in terms of issues of sexuality and how they impact their lives, that’s not happening. Why isn’t it happening is another important question. All the gay organizations are just dying to have Spanish-speaking staff. Yet, if you’re a Spanish-speaking licensed therapist or counselor, you sort of have your pick of where you’re going to work. You know, sometimes . . . why would you go work at a gay organization to have to deal with that stigma of working in the gay community? Once you do that, once you say you work at the Lesbian Community Cancer Project or Horizon Services for Gay and Lesbian People, that might bring up a lot more questions than you want to handle, so you go elsewhere. So, we need to get Latino counselors to work at these agencies. With Latino-serving organizations, you’re dealing with a lot of homophobia, potential institutional homophobia in the sense of nothing done to promote awareness of sexual identity issues or to be inclusive.

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.

Amigas: 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.