

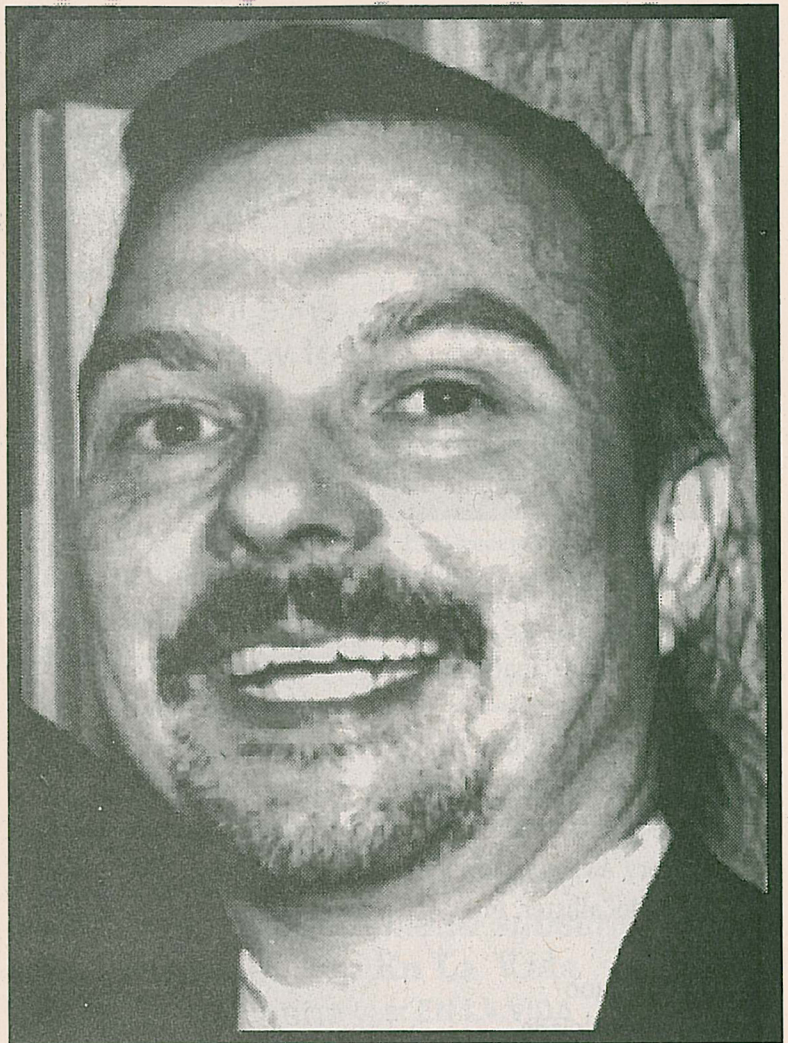
En La Vida

No. 13 July 1997 voces de lesbianas, gays, bisexuales y transgéneros latinos

RICK GARCIA

**He's Bold,
Brassy,
Sassy
and Ready
to Take
on the World—
Or You!**

**See page 10 for
an interview with
this controversial
gay activist.**



Silencio=Muerte: Red Hot + Latin

**See page 6 for a review of the newest
AIDS fundraising album, featuring,
among others, Los Lobos (left).**

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Life's All About Politics for Rick Garcia of Illinois Federation

PART ONE by Robert Castillo

Rick Garcia has been a long-time advocate for gay and lesbian civil rights both in Chicago and in Springfield, Illinois. He was part of the "Gang of Four" that helped spearhead and pass the Chicago Human Rights Ordinance. As executive director of the Illinois Federation for Human Rights, he has helped pass the Cook County Human Rights Ordinance and has been part of the effort to pass a statewide gay and lesbian civil-rights bill. Recently, EN LA VIDA talked to Garcia about the current political landscape. What follows is the first of a two-part interview with Garcia.

RC: What do you see right now as the state of the queer community here in Chicago, in Springfield and nationally?

RG: Let's start local and move up. In Chicago, I think politically the state of the queer community, on the surface, probably looks good. We have a mayor who's instituted domestic-partnership benefits in the city. In the city we have a gay and lesbian civil-rights bill, we have a thriving strip of gay and lesbian businesses, you have openly gay people all over the place, so it appears that things are good. But I have a major concern—complacency level of our community. People, because of the comfortableness—we have bars and businesses and places we can frequent openly, we have a lot of political people come around our community all the time—it gives the illusion that we've got it made, that things are fine.

RC: That complacency—what do you attribute that to? Do you also see burnout? Do you feel the election of Bill Clinton has impacted the community?

RG: I think it's a couple of things. One is, there is no doubt a large level of burnout. Let's talk about activism. With few exceptions, you for instance [involved with Queer Nation], and me, and a handful of other folks, who were around here five years ago that's still involved in activism. Who was around here three years ago? We have activists *du jour* in this city. I can understand why. I mean I certainly understand why. It takes its toll personally, financially, emotionally on individuals to fight the battles and not everyone has it in them to continue, so burnout is a real big issue. The other issue, I think, is that we've had some successes and while successes on one hand are good, they're also kind of negative ... political successes ... because people become complacent. Things are fine: they don't think that it's necessary to continue to



Rick Garcia (right), executive director of the Illinois Federation for Human Rights, with Kasey Reese, head of Chicago Professional Networking Organization. Photo by Tracy Baim

be vigilant or to continue to be involved as activism. Does that make sense?

RC: Yeah, and actually, do you see some folks thinking ... well, there's a few people out there that are very visible, let's just let them do the work.

RG: Oh absolutely! Let me give you an example of that. Of course, I'm highly visible in the community. I have a big mouth and I'm out doing all kinds of stuff. We also, the Federation, have an office right here on Halsted Street and so our name is right here. I cannot tell you the number of times, I mean weekly ... weekly, the number of calls we get from people who are experiencing difficulties or who see a situation that needs to be responded to and they want to know, "What are you going to do about it?" Or the other element of that is "Why aren't you doing anything about this?" Well, lambchop, we only have so many resources, only have so many hands and so many ears and so many eyes—we can't be every place.

RC: It's a question of picking and choosing your battles.

RG: Exactly! And there is the attitude that if we are full-time activists for this community then we should be involved in every issue that is out there and if we are not, somehow we're not doing our jobs.

RC: And it almost kind of absolves individuals of that responsibility.

RG: It does, and we do have organizations, I think Queer Nation is one, it's highly visible, I think the Federation—highly visible, that respond to issues and so when something happens people think ... the Federation will take care of it, Queer Nation will take care of it, NGLTF [the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force], on the national level, NGLTF will take care of it and the reality is ... we only have so many resources, so many bodies and we can't take care of everything, but there is that assumption that we will take care of it or if we don't take care of everything, then somehow we're not doing our job. And I think for those activists involved, it really can be overwhelming to pick and choose what issues do we address and how do we address those issues.

RC: What do you think it's going to take to get people to become involved again? It seems as if street activism has sort of died down; there's some sort of complacency ...

RG: Right.

RC: And even issues that you would think, in the past, would have gotten people out on the streets, such as the AIDS Drug Reimbursement Program ...

RG: I will tell you. I think what has happened is that, and I, God I hate to say this, but I think it's true, is that particularly with the issue of AIDS, I'm looking at the issue of AIDS, not civil rights but the AIDS issue, people have been co-opted. People have been co-opted or they're with agencies that get state or federal funds, and so, or city funds, and so therefore they can't criticize the city, the state or the federal government sufficiently because they're afraid they're gonna get their grants cut off; that's No. 1. No. 2 is that some people who have been strong advocates in terms of AIDS have either unfortunately died or have been hired or taken over by institutions in which they don't have the opportunity or the ability to speak as freely as maybe they'd like to.

RC: And major drug companies are now sponsoring a lot of ...

RG: And major drug companies, exactly, major drug companies. So I, and I know this is in the past but, what was it, three, three years ago, three or four years ago when Mayor Daley refused to increase money for AIDS services and education..

RC: Support the [Ald. Helen] Shiller Amendment ...

RG: Support the Shiller Amendment. Who spoke out about that? Who spoke out about that—let's go back and look who spoke out about that. Did the major AIDS organizations in this town speak out about it? No! This isn't necessarily a criticism, it's just an analysis. Why not? Because they were afraid that the little bit of money ...

RC: They were biting the hand that feeds them.

RG: Exactly ... exactly ... exactly. And so what happens is, you have to have independent activists to speak out on that, or people who are extremely brave and willing to risk. I mean, I remember two people, as I recall, Michael Brickman from the AIDS Alternative Health Project and Sam Clark from Open Hand were the only two people, as I recall, were the only two folks from major AIDS organizations who came to a news conference in support of the Shiller Amendment. And to get people to testify. Bob Rybicki from Bonaventure House did come and testify [Rybicki now heads the city's AIDS department], but other than that it was like, Oh, we can't touch that issue. For AIDS, that's one of the problems—people are with organizations so they can't speak, or they're dead.

And I think in terms of civil-rights activism, again, there too, there hasn't been the kind of activism or the kind of visibility in the community I think that here should have been, that there should be. And part of it is also, we're looking at the area of Chicago where most of the legislators from Chicago, be they aldermen or be they commissioners or be they state reps or senators, are already on board with gay and lesbian issues and so it's kind of like, what are we gonna do? ... So I think that makes the whole area of activism a little bit less enthusiastic or less exciting than it could be or maybe should be.

RC: And where do you see activism among queer communities not necessarily located along Halsted, among communities of color? Do you see any

power shifting or what do you see happening?

RG: Well, this is my analysis. Let's talk about where we are in terms of the gay civil-rights movement politically in the state and also how communities of color fit into that mix. No. 1 is that the exciting areas, the cutting edge in the state of Illinois right now are in down-state communities in places like Bloomington, Galesburg, Macomb, Carbondale, Normal. I mean, those are areas that are just overflowing with exciting activism—people really going out and doing grassroots organizing, talking to legislators, talking to community leaders and religious leaders and all kinds of folks, building a strong support for gay and lesbian issues. That is exciting; that is wonderful. Let's talk about minority communities. We see throughout the state of Illinois, with one exception, that Latino legislators are the strongest and best voting bloc in terms of gay and lesbian issues. The best—the absolute best.

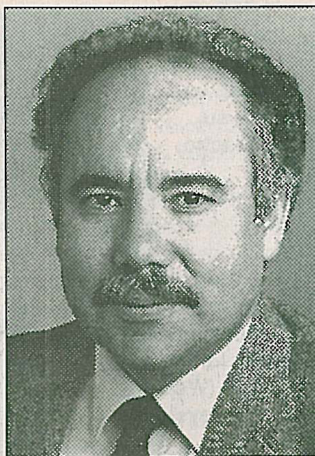
RC: That exception is ... is that here locally?

RG: That exception is locally, Ray Suarez. And in the mix of things, he isn't all that bad. I would say if we had to give Latino legislators marks, a report card, they'd all get a hundred percent, except for Ray Suarez who probably comes in maybe 89, maybe 90 percent. He's better than ... he's Cuban too isn't he, isn't he Cuban?

RC: I'm not sure.

RG: I think he is, because, you know, I mean Cubans are always like more Republican and more conservative than the rest of the Latinos but in the Illinois state legislature, in the House and Senate, every Latino has always voted with us on gay civil rights and, in addition, every Latino—there was not one Latino who supported the anti-gay marriage bill. Not one of them; not one. On the Cook County Board, every Latino is always with us and in the City Council, except for Ray Suarez, the Latinos are always with us, and he's with us 90 percent of the time.

RC: He says he attributes



State Sen. Miguel Del Valle is one of the state's most pro-gay politicians. The Latino legislators are historically the most gay-supportive in Illinois.

that to lack of openly gay folk contacting him within his ward.

RG: Exactly. So that is excellent and I think it's a real tribute and I'm gonna tell you something—it is a tribute not only to those Latino legislators, but it's also, and we're talking about communities of color, it's a tribute to Latinos because those legislators wouldn't be where they are unless they are hearing from other Latinos; simple as that. That is the rule of activism and I know as an activist one of the things that I have always been able to count on is that if we see any Latino legislator wavering, Latinos have always gone and talked to their legislators. Always. That makes me extremely fucking proud—extremely fucking proud. And this sounds very critical and I'm sorry about it but it's very different than African-Americans and I will tell you exactly why. When we have had difficulties, and I'm gonna be very frank about this—I'll probably get raked over the coals for this but I don't give a fuck. When Latinos are wavering, when Latinos have a problem, I can get on the phone and Latinos respond to Latino legislators.

RC: Miguel Del Valle has been a long-time supporter.

RG: Long-time supporter. Exactly, and we were concerned about some of the new Latino legislators. Well, I just make a couple of phone calls

and say ...

RG: Such as Sonia Silva.

RC: Yeah, you know, how are they, where are they, what's going on here and people are taken care of immediately. We almost lost, we were concerned about losing some African-American votes on the gay and lesbian civil-rights bill. Now, I cannot tell you the number of African-American gay activists that we asked to come to Springfield to do something on this and I'll tell you how many came. (Pause)

RC: How many?

RG: None. Wait—let me go back. One. One.

RC: To what do you attribute that?

RG: I have no clue. I have no clue. I always hear, you know, and I always hear people say we need to have inclusion. We need to have inclusion. We need to be included. ... If you want to be included, show the fuck up! Simple as that ... and I will tell you something is that yes, I can talk to Latino legislators and I do that fine. I can talk to white legislators and I do that fine. I talk to Republican legislators and I do that fine. I talk to African-American legislators and I do that fine, but the reality is that I cannot tell you the number of African-American legislators who say to me "Well, I don't hear from anybody," "Nobody talks to me," and, you know, and happily by some kind of fluke, African-American legislators have been with us strongly. They are second to Latinos; we can always count on African-Americans and Latinos. Latinos, in part, because Latino gay and lesbian people are talking to them. African-Americans, in large part, because they have a sense of the civil-rights movement, of what needs to be done, but not because gay and lesbian African-Americans talk to them.

RC: Do you think any of that might be ... maybe a resentment about parallels and comparisons that a lot of times gay and lesbian leaders may draw between the civil-rights movement and the queer civil-rights movement?

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Them

by Edgar Gutierrez

Showers fall every day
one hundred drips at a time.
And they brighten your day.

The shade is tall
blackening my sun.
Yet their lights show
you the ways.

They raise a glass to you
and cheer to you.

Tell you don't do it
and "be careful" if you do.

They give you one thing
you can't live without
but you don't know
what it is so you don't
understand it.

They put up with your shit
and say "go home"
so that they can invite you back
once more.

They watch you cry
and make you cry
cry with you sometimes.

Stand by your side and cut
you some slack.

They grab the rainbows
and hold them
until you can reach them.

They get mad at you
and make up with you.

Offer you smiles
in exchange for your frown.

They wipe your tears
as they fall from your face,
and enjoy with you
the sweet taste of wine.

They listen to you
when you complain.
Sit and try to take away
the pain.

All in all,
they stay and won't go away.
And sometimes,
it's just better that way.

I love you all.

**Dedicated to Andrea,
Mother, Wanda,
Monique, and Roberta.**



from previous page

not made any comments about it. "And the family?" It seems that the illness precipitated So and So's revelation that he was gay. "How could the family not know?" Yes, they suspected but, of course, they had never talked about it directly. The fact that the family did not give the necessary support, and without access to medications or treatments, meant that this young man, in the peak of his artistic career, died of that in a matter of months.

I had known for some years about the tragic reality of available medical care for people with AIDS—none. "You have to understand, Alejo, that AZT is super expensive, and here no one, except very rich people, has money for those things," a doctor friend of mine explained. With a resignation that impressed me as pre-Columbian, there was nothing more to talk about. There are no parades demanding medicine, nor

fundraisers, nor meetings to inform people.

AIDS continues to be somebody else's disease—the gringos, the ones who use drugs, the ones who live in the U.S. There has to be data about the number of AIDS cases in Mexico City, but this information does not appear to translate itself to the language of everyday reality. Even the much mentioned Hispanic family structure—that famous base of our culture—does not seem to be as inclusive when it comes to AIDS. I have heard enough stories of young men thrown to the streets to die without any support—neither from the family nor from society—Yes, the family is base of our culture, but perhaps only for heterosexuals, who uphold it like an inexorable paradigm. Silently, like a political missing person, one dies of AIDS in Mexico City.

And the future?

On a visit to Cuernavaca last

GARCIA from 11

RG: Well, you know, it could be but, in my mind, that is why it is so important for gay and lesbian African-Americans to take a visible and strong role in the movement. I will tell you, one, and there are some folks who really need to be acknowledged here and one of them is [African-American gay activist] Michael O'Connor. The reality is that Michael O'Connor has talked to a number of African-American legislators. They know him. He is their connection and many of these legislators I've talked to make reference to O'Connor and that is a model of what we need.

But when we look at the state of the question, the cutting edge right now, in terms of the civil-rights movement for our community, it is in those downstate areas No. 1, and, No. 2, in terms of Latinos, we are doing extremely well. I mean extremely well and I've said this before and I will say it again, is that Latino activists, I think, are the model for people of color in terms of political activism in this country—gay and lesbian people in this country—because, I mean ... I just see that ... because Latino activists when they are needed make those phone calls, make those visits, talk to their legislators; they do that, and African-

Americans need some work, we need work on ... having that community talk to those legislators. Now, happily, African legislators are far and above, you know, any other group and. Along those lines, if we're gonna move in the political process, gay and lesbian Republicans really also have to start being visible and vocal and open and talking to their legislators. One of the good things and one of the positive things that happened in Springfield in this last session is that we had gay Republicans come down and do serious lobbying. Glenn Goode, who is with the Secretary of State's office—George Ryan's office—took three or four days in Springfield talking to Republican legislators. Pat Dwyer, the Republican who ran for County Recorder of Deeds, came to Springfield three or four days and talked to Republican legislators and had a significant ... those two had a significant impact. Patrick Baukauskas from far downstate, another Republican came and talked. Latinos were in Springfield and had a significant effect on their legislators, and some downstate folks also were there, so those groups really had a significant effect on their legislators.

More next month's on Garcia's political worldview.

summer, I finally got together with the always sassy Amparo J. for a lunch of memories, realities and dreams. We looked like two Sartre-style socialists, enjoying the delights of a very bourgeois occasion ... I expressed to her my shock about the AIDS situation, about the consciousness of the community, of everything that I am now telling you, my gentle readers. She shared the same feelings. She and I both have scars from battling this disease, mine truly in the flesh, since I was beginning to have symptoms. We were tired, but I suspect that Amparo, mi adored Ramparo, is not about to retire soon. And in my opinion, the group that offers the greatest hope to organize the gay community politically are the lesbians. So many times in the history of the country it has been the Mexican woman who has saved the people. I hope this process repeats itself.

My friend John, with whom Amparo and I were having lunch,

gave her a key chain with the rainbow colors. "With this everyone will know who you are."

She thanked him but had to tell him that, no, not everyone in the community understood its meaning. Another of those gay Anglo things. "Poor Mexico, so far away from God and so close to the U.S." goes a common saying. The key chain struck me as an emblem of everything that meant being gay in Mexico City. So close to the gay paradise and, at the same time, so completely far away from it.

Back in Chicago, I was buying some *objet de gay* as gifts to send to some friend I had overlooked in my gifts. In one of the stores on Halsted I saw the famous key chain.

The store person told me, with some authority in her tone, that "Send him that, it's an international symbol." I smiled and said, "Not necessarily, dear. Not in Mexico City."

Lezadi is a former Chicagoan.