

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

PART TWO by Robert Castillo

Rick Garcia, executive director of the Illinois Federation for Human Rights, has been a long-time advocate for gay and lesbian civil rights both in Chicago and in Springfield, Illinois. This is Part Two of our three-part interview. See the July EN LA VIDA for Part One.

Robert Castillo: How do you see broadening the coalition of folks working on the Illinois gay and lesbian civil-rights bill? A lot of times, the gay community gets accused of just being very single issue.

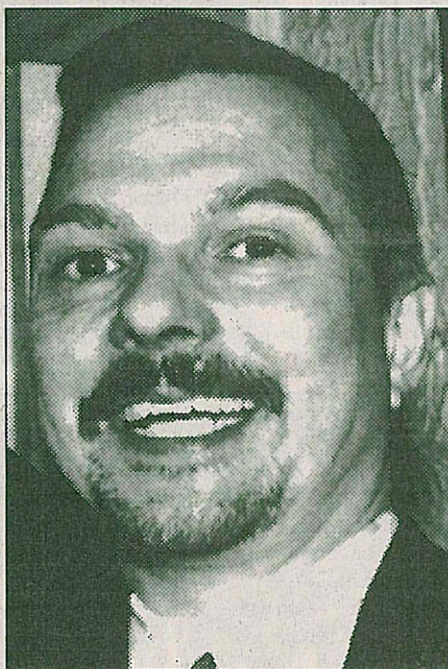
Rick Garcia: Yeah

RC: Or not necessarily reciprocating those who have stuck out their neck for the community in other issues, although I know you've testified on behalf of affirmative action downstate.

RG: Right. I look at coalition politics a little bit differently than most folks do. One of the things that we've done here at the Federation and that I personally have done has been very single issue. Very focused and very single issue—but we also have to recognize that there are times where we have to have reciprocity and there are some folks that we have to reciprocate. And there are some issues that really are more intertwined with our issue than others. When I look at coalition politics, I look at not just leftist coalition politics, but the whole gamut. Look at an issue, what issue are we working on now and try to find other groups and individuals who will agree with me on this one issue. So today you and I agree on this issue.

RC: Although most of the time we may disagree on something else.

RG: We may disagree on everything else but on this issue, the two of us agree ... and so let's move forward. I'll give you an example. There's a state rep in Springfield who is a member of the NRA and all kinds of other, kind of like, "right" organizations, but she's also a strong supporter of gay and lesbian rights and I talk to her all the time and I ask for her help all the time and we work together all the time on how to bring other people from the groups that she works with to our issue. For me, that's what good coalition building is. Now, when she comes or if there's an NRA issue, forget that. I mean, me do NRA or the Federation do NRA—I don't; I do not think so! I'm sure ... we have NRA supporters—there's no doubt about that—but it's not something that we're going to corporately be involved in. We may never see eye to eye on anything



Rick Garcia. Photo by Tracy Baim

else except the civil-rights bill. But, there are some other groups—women's groups, civil-rights groups, African-American civil-rights groups, Latino groups—that our agendas are intertwined and interwoven

RC: Certain pro-choice groups ...

RG: Exactly ... are intertwined and interwoven and so what we do is have to develop a close working relationship. I'll give you an example. Just this week, there was ... the governor nominated a man to sit on the Human Rights Commission, the mayor of Peoria, Jim Maloof is his name. This man has had a federal lawsuit against him for sexual harassment and sex discrimination and, in addition, there were 50 other people, 50 other women, who had brought complaints against him. I went to Springfield; I didn't have to go to Springfield this week but I went to Springfield to lobby against this man and some people said "Well Rick, this is a sexual harassment and sexual discrimination case. Why is the Federation being ... I mean we were one of the lead groups, with the Federation and NOW, who lead the charge against this man and the reason is, No. 1, he's going to be sitting on the Human Rights Commission and when sexual orientation is in the Civil Rights Act, that is the body that we are going to have to go to so we want to be sure that the people who sit there are above

reproach and are good. No. 2 is that we also, in a real sense, owed it ... to NOW because there has never been one issue that we have tackled or started to work on that NOW wasn't right there. So when Luellen Laurenti, the political director of NOW, calls up and says "Oh Rick, we're concerned about this. We're fighting against this. Can we count on you?" Absolutely! [Despite opposition, Maloof was selected.]

RC: Sexual harassment affects bisexual women, lesbians, transgendered women ...

RG: Absolutely. Also, in terms of the thing to get rid of affirmative action. Now ... the bill last year to get rid of affirmative action—you know, the civil-rights bill for sexual orientation says there will not be affirmative action on the basis of one's sexual orientation. So, someone could say affirmative action is not a gay issue.

RC: And others that would argue that it is a gay issue

RG: Or should be ... you know ... exactly! Nonetheless we recognize that many of our members and many of the people who are involved in this issue are racial or ethnic minorities or women and affirmative action to those and that is our base. That is our base and those are people that we have a responsibility to advocate for. So I testified against the affirmative action piece.

RC: There's this assumption the playing field has leveled off.

RG: Right

RC: ... that racism and sexism no longer influence people or affect jobs and that's not the case

RG: And it does. I will tell you: the way that we want to approach things here, the way I approach things, is that when we're talking about the areas of civil rights, whether it's for racial, ethnic or sexual minorities, we have to be vigilant for all of those groups. We are a civil-rights group.

RC: Especially when some of us belong to several of the categories simultaneously.

RG: Exactly. African-American lesbian women, you know; what are we gonna do—say we're only concerned with that part that affects you as a lesbian ... no, we're concerned about that part ...

RC: Or Latina or Latino

RG: Or the Latina, or the Latina lesbian. The Latina lesbian—what, we're only concerned about that part that is lesbian; no, we're concerned about the part that's Latina and the parts that's a woman, we're concerned about all those parts and so,

those are issues that we're very concerned about and we'll work with those, in those other areas and without, and I think the important thing is, without losing our focus because, I think, every movement or every organization has to have a focus—the essence of what you are doing and what are the other things that are related and important, but what is at the heart and what is the essence and you can never lose sight. You have to keep your eyes on the prize and never lose sight of what your essence is and what your core is. Yes, we share concerns with some other organizations but they're the ones who are responsible for leading the fight, for leading the effort. We will be there to support, to buttress, to help, but other communities have the responsibility to lead the fight, just as we, as sexual minorities or as queers will identify what the issues are that are important to us and how we want those issues addressed and that's when we ask the others for help and assistance and encouragement. ... I'll give you an example. I think it's wrong for us, for instance, to go to the NAACP and Operation PUSH and say "in your agenda of civil rights, include us" and, when you include us, you define the legislation that's important for us, and you have the lobbying effort for that legislation and you address the issues for us. Well, that's not appropriate. What is appropriate is that we say "Here we are. These are issues that are important to us. We hope that you include these issues in your agenda. We will work on your issues. Let's work together!"

RC: Or we can actually ask gay and lesbian folks who belong to the NAACP to help raise consciousness.

RG: That's exactly it, but an organization whose primary mission or goal is an ethnic or racial mission should, you know, and it's not appropriate, just as it isn't appropriate for us to identify, to go to Springfield and take the lead on an issue that affects racial or ethnic minorities. Others set that agenda. We support how they

set that agenda. Does that make sense?

RC: Yeah. I mean, if we want something done for ourselves, we should be out there doing it. We should ask people to assist us and help us.

RG: Exactly.

RC: But we'd be taking the lead. ... To me it's almost similar to ... I believe that women should be on the forefront of the pro-choice movement, not necessarily men. So it's kind of, men can assist and be pro-choice, but really ...

RG: People have a right to participate in decision making which affects their lives and that's what it amounts to. That's one of the problems I see with the national gay-rights movement, in that the legislation that we have in Washington, D.C., is being sponsored by the—Oh God, let me get this name right—The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. And people have asked "Why is ENDA [the Employment Non-Discrimination Act] so limited and largely symbolic. Why isn't it an omnibus bill that has teeth, etc.?" we are told "Well, it's really the Leadership Conference that is moving that bill and it's their decision, not our decision." Well, excuse me. It's our bill. It's our lives. It should be our decision and we should not abdicate the responsibility to some larger civil-rights group to address those issues.

RC: I think part of it is that they, the leadership, want it limited so it's more palatable for some folks.

RG: If you want palatable why don't we say that we'll all get tattoos and you can put us in concentration camps. I'm sure that'd be very palatable to a lot of folks.

RC: And that was the common idea quite a while back.

RG: I'm a firm believer that you shouldn't just be so hard-assed that you don't compromise ... if you're smart politically, you settle for less, sometimes you settle for less than what you should get, but you should never settle for less than what you can get ...

RC: Shoot high and work ...

RG: Shoot high and work your way down. I think, unfor-

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—Rick Garcia

tunately on the national level, what we have done is we have shot real low and are settling for a lot less than we should. But I don't work on the national level and that's just my own little personal opinion. I think that we should shoot higher and have a better strategy nationally, but that's not where we work. We're concerned about Illinois. In Illinois, our commitment to the queer community.

RC: Meaning the Federation.

RG: The Federation, exactly. Our commitment is to shoot as high as we possibly can and to expect and to demand the absolute most that we can get and not shiver away our rights in any way shape or form. It may take a little bit longer—it certainly will be a little bit harder—but in the long run it will pay off because what we're concerned about is that everyone in our state be treated fairly and equitably—one set of rules for everybody. That's how we're operating here in Illinois and that's what we're committed to doing. It's not the way I would do things nationally.

RC: I'm kind of shifting gears. What advice do you offer to folks, both Latino queers and other folks who want to become politically active, whether it be running as a candidate, doing press campaigns ...

RG: Yes. You know what my advice is. My advice to people, and particularly, particularly Latinos and African-Americans, people of color, Asians too fit into this category a lot, that is, stand up for you, yourself, and stand up for your community. Always do that. Stand up. Wherever you are. Every one of

us. Every one of us has a responsibility to make sure that we live in a fair and just society. Every one of us. And we all have different gifts and talents. The hand can't say to the arm "I don't need you." The head can't say to the legs "get out of here; you're not good for us," but it's the whole body working together. My advice to people is that when you have seen an injustice, when you have been treated unjustly, if you can personally speak out and do something about it, do it, but if you can't, go to someone who can advocate for you. And sometimes the most that you can do because of your situation, whatever it is, is to tell somebody, to give people information, to make that phone call to an organization and say "this is happening and it's unfair and I can't do anything about it because of my situation." Or you are in a situation where you can stand up and you can say "I'm not going to take this," and you can fight back. I believe strongly that everyone should be involved in one way or another because if you're not involved then you just become nothing but a whipping post.

RC: Politically, do you see maybe the Latino/a community, maybe other communities of color, not wanting or reluctant to get involved politically? We see that a lot even within the so-called "mainstream" gay and lesbian community.

RG: Right. I mean it's a couple of things going. No. 1 is that when we think of the gay community, we think of gay activism—what do we think about? White men on the Lakefront. Gay politics? White men.

RC: Halsted Street.

RG: Halsted Street. We think of cocktail parties and dinners in the \$175-\$250 range, tuxedos; that is gay activism. Increasingly, that is what we view gay activism to be and unless you are doing high-ticket events and you're professional types, then you don't count. That is the message we're sending to our community.

In next month's EN LA VIDA, Garcia looks at the problems of both racism and classism.