

Garcia: Class Divides Community

PART THREE by Robert Castillo

This is the final installment of our three-part interview with Rick Garcia, director of the Illinois Federation for Human Rights.

RG: When we look at the problems in the community, when we look at problems in our society, it isn't race. It is not race in any way, shape or form. It's not ethnicity. It's class. Pure and simple. The problems that we have in our community and the divisions are not along race lines; they're along class lines and nobody can tell me any differently because I see it myself. I see it myself over and over and over again that people are dismissed not on the basis of their race, people are dismissed not on the basis of their ethnicity, people are dismissed not on the basis of their sex, they are dismissed on the basis of their class and our community has a tendency to be extremely classist. ... Most people don't fuck with me, alright, but I've been fucked with twice. Once was thinly veiled racism and the other—and the most egregious one—was classism. I was treated like a spic yard boy.

RC: This was here in the city?

RG: Right here in the city! Right here in the city and I will tell you this is, when I responded to that in a very strong way, I was criticized. I was criticized by white folks because they didn't understand—they certainly didn't understand—the anger that I had, to be dismissed as a spic yard boy—a classist and racist attitude. I responded very angrily and I would respond that way again to that situation and I will tell you, the white folks that I work with, and I'm gonna be real upfront about this, did not understand, were angry at me for being so mean, for being so vicious, because I called classism and I called racism what it was and I would not put up with it. I'm not gonna put up with it out there against anybody else; I'm not gonna put up with it against me. That's something that I think is so important—that people in our community, especially people of color in our community, have to do this. And I'm not saying play the race card because there are some folks, and you know 'em as well as I do, who play that race card every time you look cross-eyed at them and I think that really diminishes and dismisses the seriousness of racism and classism. The minute you don't get your way you say "You're doing this to me because I'm a Latina, OK bye." Well, wait a minute, honey, give me a break! Or "you're doing this to me because I'm Black" and "We're not included because we're Black." No. No. No. There is racism. There is classism, but let's be very careful—let's be very careful, that we identify it as such and fight against what is really there and not just "I'm not getting my way, so I'm gonna play the race card." I think folks do that, but again, one of the problems we have is that there is racism, there is classism in our community and one of the tasks, I think, that people of color in our community have to do is to step

out and to be bold and to not seek permission from the white folks on the lakefront. Get involved in politics. Get involved in your local political organization.

RC: Community groups.

RG: That is the most important thing. Let me give you a little prediction here, something that I think is so very important. We have all these white political wanna-bes on the lakefront, alright, who all want to run for office, you know who, we don't have to mention names because we all know the names, and so, of course, they do the whole little being all the right places at all the right times and they also recognize that they can't run against any of the elected officials here on the lake because a lot of these elected officials are more queer than the queers ourselves, OK. It's difficult to run against our friends. How can you run against Sara Feigenholtz? You can't; nobody should. Or Carol Ronen, alright, and so it's difficult. We need to have someone in City Council. We desperately need someone on Cook County Board. I will tell you, it seems to me, that a Latina or a Latino could have a very good shot in City Council or on County Board. ... Running as openly lesbian or gay. I was talking to someone the other day and I said if I was just sitting back and someone said "OK. Rick. Let's look at the political landscape; where are we going to run people so we have a gay or lesbian voice in City Council." I would start looking at wards that have a high Latino population and I would start identifying some folks to run in those wards. I think it can be done.

RC: Such as the 35th Ward, 25th Ward.

RG: Exactly. A lot of those places. Now, you know, you can say "Well wait a minute. Haven't all these folks really run well on our issues." And that's true, the Latino bloc is the best in ...

RC: It's sitting at the table or asking somebody to give you something that's on the table.

RG: Exactly. Exactly. I used to be satisfied with, because I thought that it doesn't matter if we have openly gay people in elected, I mean, I was one of these idiots, I'll tell you, who thought if we have openly gay elected officials, fine, but if we don't, as long as we have strong activists and good grassroots organizing and good political organizations, we can get what we want. We don't need to be there, but I've learned my lesson with Larry McKeon. Seeing what he has done to the Illinois legislature; that our voice is in Springfield and never in my years of activism here in Illinois have I seen the importance of our own voices in a legislative body, but because in the past if someone said something ridiculous, we'd have to wait for one of our friends to raise their hand and say "Oh, by the way, that's nyab.nyab.nyab.nyab.nyab." but right now in the Illinois legislature where Larry McKeon is, the minute someone even blinks negatively in our direction, we have one

of our very own stand up and in our own voice ... put the people in their place.

RC: And it may make it harder for somebody to attack, once they know someone personally and have worked with someone personally, it might change the tone.

RG: Absolutely, and so I've gone 180 degrees in believing the importance of having openly gay elected officials. What I hope to see is that the officials, the people that we elect in City Council and County Board, I hope that they're African-American and Latino. I think that is so, so important. I mean, let me tell you, right up the road in the 47th Ward is an excellent place for us to start looking at someone to run there. I mean, that is an excellent place. We have Ald. Gene Schulter there who has a mixed record on gay and lesbian issues. He screws up and then he tries to make nice. I like Gene and I have a good relationship with him, but there are serious questions ...

RC: And there's also been some concerns about his treatment of Latino gay and lesbian folks within the ward.

RG: Well exactly. Look what happened at El Gato Negro (bar).

RC: Or maybe some folks come out that may be gay or lesbian or ...

RG: Well, I think coming out is one of the most important things people can do. I'm always hoping and praying that one morning I'll wake up and the closeted gay and lesbian people in the Illinois legislature will all come out on the same day and then form a gay caucus. The reason I say that is, right now, Mr. Madigan has a majority of what, two or three people, and if we had a caucus—a gay /lesbian caucus—with five folks who put their foot down and said "Wait a minute, you want this—you give us that or we're not gonna vote with you." ...

I make no apologies for playing hardball; this is politics and you play hardball in politics, if you want to win. If you just want to be feel good, nice, fine, OK. If you're doing this for therapy or touchy feely stuff then you don't have to play hardball. "Everyone should love me"—well, screw that, OK.

RC: It doesn't always get us equality.

RG: You know what it gets us, it gets you nothing. It doesn't get you respect. It gets you nothing. If you roll over and let people fuck you, you're gonna get fucked—period! Simple as that. Let people step on you, they will step on you. Simple as that. You need to play hardball. I will admit that sometimes I've played hardball when I didn't need to play hardball. It's like taking an elephant gun to kill an ant; sometimes I've done that and I think that that's one of the things that, as I get older, I want to be more cautious about and that I recommend to folks is that do not be afraid to play hardball if you have to, but only play hardball when you have to. Don't waste it. I think that's one of the things I've learned.