

New national Latino gay group forms: Unid@s directors to focus on human rights issues

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A new Washington-based, national organization for Latino gays has formed and announced its board of directors. The group's first meeting is tentatively planned for April.

Unid@s board member Pedro Julio Serrano describes the organization as a grassroots, national advocacy group that will function as a liaison between resource providers and local organizations.

"Unid@s means 'everybody together,'" Serrano said. "We use the 'at' symbol because when you want it to refer to females you use 'unidas' and males, 'unidos.' We use 'unid@s' to show our diversity, unity and inclusivity."

He said that the organization will not offer direct programming at first because the board does not want to overstep work being done by other Latino agencies at the local level. Serrano, who is also on the communications team for the **National Gay & Lesbian Task Force**, said the Task Force will work with Unid@s to help with movement and capacity building as well as technical assistance. The Gill Foundation has provided seed money to help the organization get started.

"We know they know their communities and can do programming that is more focused on what their communities need," Serrano said. "We want to support their work."

They will be working with other groups to focus on human rights issues of importance to gay Latinos, including immigration and racial and economic justice. He said Latinos are caught in the double bind of being discriminated against because of race and sexual orientation.

"We would like to work toward creating a more just society for all, especially Latinos," he said.

Washington transgender activist Ruby Corado is also on the board, which includes representatives from seven regions of the U.S., plus Puerto Rico. There are 13 board seats, made up of a representative from each region (not including Puerto Rico), and six more spots for areas that have large concentrations of Latinos, including New York, California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Texas and D.C. Corado represents the District as one of its Latina transgender members.

"We wanted to make sure we had four lesbians or bisexual women, four transgender people and four gay or bisexual men," she said. "We have every spot filled except for one Illinois transgender person."

Board members include transgender members Corado, Gael Gudin Guevara and Yosenio Lewis; gay members Jorge Alexandro Cestou, Wilfred Labiosa, Pedro Julio Serrano, Gabriel Gonzalez and Lorenzo Herrera y Lozano; and lesbian members Monica Paher, Sandra Telep, Ada Conde Vidal and Cristina Martinez. The organization also includes a spot for an extra gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person from any of the geographical areas. Unid@s chairpersons are Corado and Herrera.

Unid@s took two and a half years to develop, rising from the ashes of the national Latino organization National Latino/a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Organization or "LLEGO," which went bankrupt in September 2004 under the direction of its former president Martin Ornelas-Quintero, the sole manager of LLEGO's financial affairs. Funding was provided by

the Gill Foundation, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, Human Rights Campaign, American Airlines and other corporate and private sponsors.

The Blade reported in 2002 that when Ornelas-Quintero began running the organization in 1996, LLEGO had less than a dozen employees and an operating budget of \$500,000. By 2002, the organization reported revenue of \$2.8 million, with Ornelas-Quintero's salary reported to be \$68,960. By the time Ornelas-Quintero left two years later and the organization abruptly shut its doors, all 14 of its employees were laid off and LLEGO was in the red by \$700,000.

Gill Foundation executive director Rodger McFarlane said in an October 2004 interview with the Blade that his organization gave LLEGO a total of \$400,000 over 10 years. He said LLEGO's downfall was an over-reliance on government contracts and the lack of a development plan and no sustained donor base.

When LLEGO's doors shut, Latino gay activists in Seattle, who were slated to host LLEGO's national Encuentro Conference in October 2004, decided to host a national forum. The event consisted of workshops and training sessions for Latino activists. It was also the beginning of Unid@s.