

## Actions speak louder than words

**Column published in the largest Spanish language newspaper in the United States, *La Opinión* in Los Angeles, California – with 477,319 readers daily.**

*By Pedro Julio Serrano*  
*Wednesday, August 15, 2007*

When I heard Gov. Bill Richardson utter the word *maricón*, I almost couldn't believe it.

As a Latino gay man, I have seen time and time again how this and other hurtful words are used to degrade our identities, our gay identity as well as our Latino identity. As a Latino man, Gov. Richardson should have known better. Now as a presidential candidate, he has to do something about it.

While Richardson has had a great record of supporting rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, the use of the word *maricón* has profound connotations in our Latino culture. It is used to demean gay people and brings a lot of hurt, not only to gays who are subject to homophobia, but to the people that use the word without remorse. Because harsh words have been used against our Latino identity, we should know better and not use language that is inflammatory, hurtful and hateful. When a person of his stature uses this language, it sends a wrong signal of approval to using these demeaning words.

Gov. Richardson's record shows that he is not a homophobic man; on the contrary, he has supported LGBT rights during his public career and led efforts in New Mexico to amend its laws to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. He supports civil unions for gay and lesbian couples; he supports the repeal of the discriminatory 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' military policy; he supports adoption by lesbian and gay couples; he opposes the discriminatory federal amendment to prohibit same-sex marriage. He has spoken for LGBT rights in front of non-gay audiences, something presidential candidates almost never do.

But the fact is that he took the homophobic bait put forth by Don Imus on his radio show and joined him in repeating it. We all make mistakes, and given Gov. Richardson's record, I'm sure we all would have accepted a sincere apology. Unfortunately, instead of simply saying he was sorry, he offered the lame excuse, "In the Spanish I grew up speaking, the term (*maricón*) means simply 'gay,' not positive or negative..." Come on! *Maricón* is derogatory no matter what kind of Spanish someone grows up with, and the fact that he's been a friend to our community makes this kind of dodge even more problematic.

To make things worse, during a forum focused on gay issues in Los Angeles recently, Richardson stumbled while being questioned if homosexuality was a choice. He said "yes, it is a choice." And when the panelist gave him a chance to redeem himself, he just couldn't get it straight. Speaking to the media, he continued to back pedal and equivocate about his response for days. It is important to have a great record of supporting our issues; but Richardson must speak out clearly, in front of all audiences, in favor of our humanity.

He has a golden opportunity in his hands, not only to debunk the myth that Latinos are more homophobic than anyone else, but to show that his support of LGBT rights in the past can be transported to the platform of a presidential campaign. For instance, he could now start a conversation about homophobia and how hate hurts us all. Especially, when Congress is considering hate crimes legislation and Pres. Bush has threatened to veto it. Richardson could use this moment to show his remorse on his own words and show real leadership on this critical issue at the same time.

We have seen how the White House has been used by two kinds of presidents, one like Bush who might not use inflammatory words like *maricón*, but have forced gay people onto a second-class citizenship. And one like Clinton who said we were part of his dream but failed to deliver on the promise of equality.

In a time when we have lacked politicians with the moral leadership to stand up against intolerance, discrimination and division in this country, we need leaders who will not stand against hatred and will lift us to a new place — a place where we all count. And we need presidential candidates who will speak to all minorities — those of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and yes, sexual orientation and gender identity — and tell us that we are part of their mission, treat us with dignity and respect, but most importantly, will act on their promises.

Gov. Richardson has the opportunity to show he really cares, give a loud and clear apology and to use the bully pulpit of the campaign trail to speak openly and clearly in support of equality for LGBT people. He must let us know that in the future, like in his past, he will deliver on the promises of equality for LGBT people.

It's the only way to do it because in our Latino culture and in this country, actions speak louder than words.

*Pedro Julio Serrano is Communications Coordinator for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.*