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Latinos seek understanding

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LA TIN OS

*seek
understanding*

By: Anthony Bader

A line of people waiting to enter the Great Hall in the Iowa State Memorial Union wound up and down the hall and up the stairs around the building, where they waited to attend a September discussion on racism, diversity and inclusion.

There, a panel of members of the Latino activist group, Latinos Unidos for Change (LUCHA), recounted stories of every day, subtle and not-so-subtle, racism and aggression they said they endured mostly from white students. They told stories that included students asking them where they are really from, getting stared at while speaking Spanish in public or seeing Halloween costumes making a joke of some students' Mexican culture.

"I think most microaggressions stem out of ignorance," said Monica Diaz, a member of LUCHA, who said white students do not always have bad intentions when they do those things.

She explained further that most of the time people are well intentioned but that there is a disconnect between what they are trying to say and what they are saying.

Victor Aguilar-Lopez, president of the Latino Heritage Committee at ISU and a student from California, says he has had a similar experience to those on the panel with regard to trying to fit in at Iowa State University.

"It's as though I'm made to feel like I'm in a box, made to feel different. Coming to Iowa made me aware that I was brown," Aguilar-Lopez said.

After moving to a state with a mostly white population, he is now more conscious of his surroundings and worries at times about generally being accepted by other ISU students, Aguilar-Lopez said.

While instances of microaggressions and stereotyping happen on campus, it can be changed, said Jason Boyles, a senior in marketing.

"The best way to end racism is to meet someone from that nationality," Boyles said. "Once you meet someone who breaks your stereotypes, you can't think that way anymore."

Boyles also pointed out that at times, open discussions are hard to start because many people are scared it might turn into a heated and emotional argument.

Iowa State has taken action to attempt to ease the tension. As a result of a recent diversity audit conducted by The Jackson Consulting Firm, a new administrative position has been created: vice president of diversity and inclusion.

Reginald Stewart, formerly the chief diversity officer at the University of Nevada, Reno, was the person selected to fill the role.

It will take a collaborative effort to increase diversity and cultural awareness on campus, and people will have to step out of their comfort zones to make progress, Stewart said. He said he hopes he can give people the tools they need to succeed and help them start a conversation.

“The first thing you do is allow people to make mistakes,” Stewart said. “The goal is to get people to say, ‘I know this is unfamiliar, it’s OK not to know everything.’”

Stewart also points out that this problem is not isolated to Iowa State. Many universities and large companies are instituting officer positions related to diversity, as it is becoming increasingly essential to be more culturally aware in today’s society.

PERCEPTIONS AND PORTRAYALS OF LATINOS

These everyday errors committed by some white students discussed at the forum show that some Latinos feel there is a lack of understanding between the two groups. So, they aren’t grasping that some Latino students are feeling left out of the conversation when it comes to politics.

Part of the reason that contributes to some white Americans having a skewed perception of Latino issues is because of the way they are portrayed in the media.

Alejandro Pino, commissioner in Cedar Rapids for the Office of Latino Affairs of the Iowa Department of Human Rights, said that the media often has the wrong focus with regard to Latino issues.

“When you look at the news, it’s always immigration,” Pino said. “That is very important for the Latino population, but it is not the only issue they care about.”

Many Latinos do still support comprehensive immigration reform, however, many of the concerns of Latinos in Iowa are essentially the same as other Iowans. Typical hotly debated topics such

as access to better jobs, affordable health care and access to higher education are also deciding factors for Latino voters.

In the opinion of Boyles, the media often skews issues related to Latinos, and they twist stories by using certain statistics that portray issues inaccurately.

“What is going to generate more buzz, immigrants are great? Or they’re destroying the country?” he said.

Diaz agrees that the media isn’t fair when it comes to Latino issues.

“The media doesn’t focus on real issues, just what certain politicians are saying,” Diaz said.

And some politicians are saying things that ostracize millions of Latinos in the United States.

TRUMP’S SUPPORT SHOWS PROGRESS STILL NEEDED

It’s no secret that Donald Trump has received a large amount of media attention ever since he made his racist remarks about Mexicans when announcing he was running for president. While Trump’s comments have been met with cheers by some voters, they have been met with disdain from many Latino voters. Pino has talked with many members in Latino communities about Trump.

“Many of the folks that I have talked to feel an anger and disappointment of how he is portraying an entire population of people,” Pino said.

Rob Barron, co-founder of the Latino Political Network in Iowa, said Trump is just playing the media.

“He’s trying to push down a group of people to make himself look better; he’s doing it so he gets more free media,” Barron said. Trump’s comments have angered some Latinos into taking greater action

than before.

Aguilar-Lopez said that his parents and other Latinos he has talked to have become more politically conscious since Trump’s infamous speech.

LACK OF REPRESENTATION FOR LATINOS

The Latino Political Network attempts to get more Latinos to hold official positions to advocate for and inspire other Latinos to become more politically active.

“Only about 10 or 12 positions out of 7,500 in the state of Iowa are held by Latinos,” Barron said. The 7,500 figure includes town government, county government and school board positions among others. Twelve out of 7,500 is less than one percent, while five percent of the Iowa population is Latino.

Barron said it is a positive thing for Latinos to hold these positions because it is much easier for representatives to advocate the interests of a certain group if they have the same background as them. Although, he added it is not 100 percent necessary.

“For me, the best quality for any elected official is humility,” Barron said. He said that as long as a politician stays humble and listens to his or her constituents, he or she could be a good representative for anyone.

For Diaz, politicians specifically are not always needed, but rather sometimes it is better for people to form groups on their own in order to advocate their own rights.

Aguilar-Lopez points out that organizations formed by regular people can give a voice to people who face barriers making themselves heard. For example, he said that many organizations advocate for undocumented immigrants who fear legal repercussions if they try to speak out.