

Musings of a gay veterano REFORMISTA librarian...
By Bob Diaz

During the recent REFORMA fundraiser in Anaheim, Tatiana de la Tierra, one of the co-editors of the REFORMA newsletter approached me and asked me if I had ever done any "queer" related programming for REFORMA. I relayed to that I had indeed done lots of gay-related programming in the past, but not in REFORMA per se. I shared with her my story, and argued that there have been many who have come before us who have helped pave the way for our acceptance into society and our profession.. We are here because of them, I argued. She asked me to write it all down. So, here goes....

To those who came before us, whoever you are or were, I'd like to acknowledge your efforts, however big or small they might have been. You may be unsung, but you aren't forgotten. Here's to you, to my GLBT Latino/a librarian brothers and sisters!! You helped pave the way for the rest of us, and without your efforts and your courage, we wouldn't be where we are today. It doesn't matter if you were "out" or not. You did what you had to do, sometimes very quietly. You helped to build the foundation upon which we now stand.

It wasn't until 1969 and the Stonewall Riots in New York City that gays and lesbians in the U.S. began to openly demand respect and to stand up for their rights. Who would have figured that by 1973, the American Psychiatric Association would take homosexuality off its "official" list of mental illnesses, and that the remainder of '70's would be so liberating for the gay community?

The seventies were also in many ways, very liberating for the Library profession. Once the exclusive domain of the Anglo-Saxon female, the library profession in the U.S experienced an "awakening" of sorts in the early seventies. Suddenly, progressive groups within ALA formed the Social Responsibility Roundtable, the Feminist Task Force and the Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Independent groups like REFORMA and the Black Caucus also began to gain footing, demanding that library services be equitably provided to their communities. Social responsibility emerged as a key value for the profession and became an important component of the missions of these organizations.

As is well known, REFORMA was founded in the early '70's by Dr. Arnulfo Trejo and others. Its mission, in a nutshell, was to promote library services to the Spanish Speaking. It also served as a social vehicle for Latino/a librarians and their friends to come together in celebration of "community"--it gave members a means by which to share their stories as Latino librarians and it provided a vehicle for mentoring and sharing knowledge.

On the LGBT side, Barbara Gittings, a long time gay rights activist and librarian, was instrumental in getting the Gay and Lesbian Task Force off the ground in ALA in the early seventies. I was fortunate enough to hear her speak a couple of times at ALA. She has written a pamphlet describing the early years of the GLBT Task Force. It's quite funny and definitely worth reading. It's entitled, Gays in library land : the Gay and

Lesbian Task Force of the American Library Association : the first sixteen years. It also appears in the following anthology: Daring to Find Our Own Names, by James V. Carmichael, Jr., 1998. For more information on Ms. Gittings see: <http://www.rainbowhistory.org/gittings2.htm>

I cannot say for sure whether there were any Latino/a gays and lesbians involved in REFORMA or whether any REFORMISTAS were “out” and involved, for example, in the Gay and Lesbian Task Force in the seventies and early eighties, but it is quite possible that over the course of such a long time there did indeed exist at least a few members who crossed over and participated in both organizations. It could also be that there existed REFORMISTAS who were out but not part of the GLBT Task Force. Perhaps a REFORMISTA or two even did a program on services to the lgbt community back in, say, 1979. Who knows? Maybe REFORMA had a number of members who were in the closet... Why not? (A note to those of you who remember the old days...tell us your stories! You can come out now!!!!)

I started college in 1977, and by the following year at the age of 19, considered myself to be gay. By my mid-twenties, I even publicly came out on a radio show I hosted. Overall, however, the eighties, or the Reagan years, weren't so kind to us gays and lesbians. The AIDS crisis hit, forcing many people back into the closet. AIDS became known as a “gay disease” and if you were a young gay male.... well let's just say times were hard. Many of us hid. Jobs could be lost.

In 1987, I started my career as a librarian at the Nogales/Santa Cruz County Library in Nogales, Arizona, but after six months, I got restless and found a job with the University of Michigan Undergraduate Library. While there, I was encouraged to get involved in the broader profession, so in 1988 I joined REFORMA and ALA, including the Gay and Lesbian Roundtable. I also became involved with the emerging issue of “diversity”, and was a “charter member” of the University of Michigan Library Diversity Task Force. I was also a founding member of the Library's Gay and Lesbian Library Staff (GALLS) organization.

In those early years, while I got involved in the ALA Gay and Lesbian Task Force and other committees, I really felt like REFORMA was my home base. The people in REFORMA, for the most part, were really nice. I even knew several other REFORMISTAS who were gay, but not “out” in REFORMA. It wasn't quite yet generally acceptable to be out or to talk openly about gay-related issues. There were individual exceptions, of course, but I can even recall a conversation where I was ridiculed for being so “open” about my sexual preference. I remember wondering, “am I the only openly gay Latino involved in both REFORMA and the Gay and Lesbian Task Force?” Oh, maybe there were a handful of others involved at that point. Who knows? The point is the climate, for me and other gblt members, was a tad chilly in REFORMA. Those of us who were gblt weren't organized either. Perhaps there just weren't enough of us willing at that point to self identify as gay.. It still felt threatening to stick one's neck out.

Even if REFORMA wasn't formally ready to tackle gay and lesbian issues in the late eighties/early nineties I found other ways to contribute to the promotion of library services to lgbt people. My main interest was in building collections. I was able to do this, for example, at the University of Michigan Undergraduate Library. While there, I worked diligently to expand our holdings in both the gay and lesbian and Chicano literature collections. It was indeed a thrill to add to the collection works by people like Arturo Islas, Michael Nava and Cherie Moraga, authors who were both Latino and gay. JUST LIKE ME! At the national level, within the Gay and Lesbian Task Force, I was appointed to the GLBT Book Award Committee for two years. Later, I participated in a GLBTRT-sponsored program on diversity-related programming with an emphasis on gay issues.

By 1992, I was back home in Tucson, working as the Assistant to the Dean for Staff Development, Recruitment and Diversity at the University of Arizona Library. I organized programs and workshops that tackled issues like racism and homophobia and would occasionally bring in guest speakers like Leslie Feinberg, a transgendered activist and author of *Stone Butch Blues*, to speak at the University. I also organized a student chapter of REFORMA (taking advantage of the fact that the Library School was bringing in a number of Latino/a students at that point), and was the group's sponsor for a couple of years. I did this kind of work for 8 years, gaining along the way valuable experience in library administration, personnel, programming and event production, diversity training and staff development.

Again, while nobody knows for sure how many glbt librarians have ever been active in REFORMA or how many there were specifically in the late eighties and early nineties, during my first few years in the organization the vast majority of lgbt people I knew were not out, at least in REFORMA. By the mid- to late 90's, however, more glbt latinos, many of who were completely out of the closet, began to join the organization, and glbt programs were beginning to be included at our newly established national conferences. I believe these national conferences have been very beneficial to our membership. They provide a vehicle by which we can have very broad participation among many members. Such opportunities have indeed provided greater visibility for the glbt membership of REFORMA

For example, the first REFORMA national conference was held in 1996 in Austin, Texas. Included in the list of programs was one entitled, "Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered: Resources materials, and services". The description read: "a panel discussion of the past, present and future status of materials and resources by G/L/B/T Spanish Speaking and Hispanic patrons; an overview with panelists involved in getting this material out into the world; and a multi media presentation." The name of panelists is not included in the program. Barbara Gomez, a librarian from Western Connecticut State University is listed as the main speaker.

The next national conference included not one, but two programs on lgbt issues. The first was entitled, "Community History and the Evidence of Desire: The Archivo Rodrigo Reyes (A Gay and Lesbian Latino Archives)" The presenters were Horacio Roque

Ramirez, and Luis Alberto de la Garza, both librarians from UC Berkeley. . The second program was called “Entendidos: The Latino Queer Community and Their Allies”. Five REFORMISTAS—Mario Ascencio, Brigida Campos, Miguel Juarez, Ina Rimpau, and tatiana de la tierra-- were listed as participants. The program was in two parts: the first was a panel discussion addressing library services to the lgbt community and the second was a reading that featured members of REFORMA in addition to members of the Tucson community. REFORMISTA Clara Chu, participated as well.

The Joint Librarians of Color Conference also included programming on lgbt issues, including one by the late Yolanda Retter entitled, “LGBT People of Color Resources and Services in Libraries and Archives”, and the upcoming REFORMA conference will also include a program by tatiana de la tierra entitled, “La Joteria en la Biblioteca: Where is it?”. It’s wonderful to see this happening in REFORMA, and it’s great to realize that the organization has grown in its acceptance of lgbt issues. I was very proud of Mario Ascencio when he made services to the Latino/a lgbt population one of his top priorities. The REFORMA President’s program that he put together for our most recent ALA conference was extraordinary. Each and every one of the panelists, including REFORMISTAS, tatiana de la tierra, Adan Griego, and Dr. Jamie Campbell Naido, was excellent. I just wish more people had attended.

So what happens next? Should REFORMA have an lgbt services committee? Getting organized provides one with many opportunities for engagement. Are there now enough of us to tackle something like this? Would a listserv help us keep in touch? Organizing takes energy and commitment, and it’s hard, frustrating work at times.

At this point in my own career, I am now in my eighth year as a performing arts librarian. I am also a radio show host at a community radio station in Tucson. After all these years as a librarian (21 and counting) I still work diligently to provide access to works outside the mainstream, and I still have a strong interest in all aspects of diversity. However, I now try to be more careful about what I agree to take on these days, especially after committing to do things in the past that I couldn’t for one reason or another follow through on. We all eventually find our niche in the world. For some of us, it’s focusing on glbt issues, for others its preserving and promoting the music of one’s culture, and yet for others, its marching in the streets. Luckily, over the course of my twenty one year career, I’ve been able to do a little of all of it

For those of you lgbt folk who were members of REFORMA *en aquellos tiempos*..., I’d love to hear from you. I can be reached at diazj@u.library.arizona.edu.