

IN person

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Talking with

ROBERTO MAESTAS

**Executive Director of
El Centro De La Raza**

In the middle of the country's immigration debate, Roberto Maestas is once again taking to the streets of the Northwest, just as he has been for more than three decades. He says the heart of his activism comes from the struggle to exist — the same struggle today and yesterday.

Maestas is the executive director of El Centro De La Raza, a community center in Beacon Hill and a symbol of the early civil rights movement. The center serves as a gathering place for people of all ethnicities with programs that cover basic needs to means for advancement. El Centro was formed after the three-month occupation of the building by Maestas and other community members in 1972, when funding of the English and Adult Basic Education Program at the Duwamish branch of South Seattle Community College was abruptly cut off.

In 1970, the first time census data became available for Latinos in Seattle, the count for those of Spanish-speaking origin was 10,835. In 2000, the Census recorded 29,719 Latinos living in Seattle. The Census Bureau estimated 39.9 million Latinos in the United States in 2003 and now projects 102.6 million by 2050. "We knew there would be more coming, how come they (the government) didn't?" asks Maestas, who explains why there's still a long struggle ahead.

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF PROTESTS: The streets are where it's always been. Never in the history of struggle have the streets not remained a part of the equation. We can't buy into the myth that hitting the streets is a '60s thing.

ON CRIMINALIZING UNDOCUMENTED WORKERS: Most people don't believe the Senate would be so extreme. I haven't heard of anyone preparing for that. People are just interested in fighting back.

ON WHAT UNDOCUMENTED WORKERS ARE TELLING THEIR CHILDREN: Parents are not going to alarm children on something that they don't believe the Senate will not approve. There is a huge number of children who are participating in all of the activities. They are aware of the situation.

ON THE DIFFERENT OPINIONS CONCERNING IMMIGRATION: There are always differences of opinions in politics and especially on such a complicated

issue. The people who go against the tide are called "contras" (contrary ones). But the overwhelming majority across all lines in the Latino community support comprehensive reform with a civilized path to citizenship.

ON WHY IMMIGRATION SHOULD NOT JUST BE A LATINO ISSUE: This issue is not about legal or illegal, it is about people trying to survive in a world and in a system we did not create...We are receiving huge support in resolutions, forums, letters and marches from people and organizations of all races.

ON EL CENTRO DE LA RAZA'S APPROACH TO HELPING THE COMMUNITY: This organization is famous even though it's poor and has a rowdy history, because El Centro has broken the mold. People in our society get fragmented and specialized. We said no, it's all connected...politics, education, women's rights, economics, they are all interconnected. So we designed a program to

show that you don't have to be pigeonholed into doing just one thing.

ON INFLUENCE AND ACTIVISM ACROSS GENERATIONS: When the Seattle School District planned to eliminate the Chicano Studies Program, our children marched down to the School District and demanded for it to stay. The most wonderful thing is that the students did it for themselves. Their activism absolves what we did over 33 years ago. Thirty-three years is like a blink of an eye, and we continue to demand our culture and dignity.

ON BEING THE YOUNGEST OF 16 BROTHER AND SISTERS: The Latino culture and stereotype runs that the man runs the show. My grandfather was extremely rugged. He would tame wild horses and brand bulls in Mexico. In the functional family, as a little boy I would hear my grandmother giving him instructions, giving him his marching orders. And so I just laugh, you know there is the power.

ON GAINING POLITICAL POWER: I learned how to really find out who was running the show every time bureaucracy ripped me off. We didn't want to talk to layers of people before we got to the mayor. I say, don't waste our time and B.S. us for as long as we allow it. So we teach our children today, you have rights, exercise them, don't stand still and be intimidated by badges, titles and power, get the picture and examine where we are at. It's not in their (the government's) interest to ignore us. We come to afflict them. It's a great recipe!

ON THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY VS. COMMUNITY: We are part of business, and over the years business has been more and more supportive of us...What business means to us is to make as much money as we can and use it towards the greater good, acquire as much political power that we can and use it for the greatest number. That's not complicated. It's complicated to do it, but it's not complicated to understand.

—As told to CAROLINE LI

