



Jesus Ramirez-Valles,
UIC SPH Professor and
Tal Como Somos film producer

LIFE TORN BETWEEN CULTURE & LOVE

Professor's Documentary Examines Stigma of Being Gay in Latino Community

In a culture celebrated for its rich traditions, close-knit families, and strong faith, being Latino and gay, bisexual, or transgender (GBT) is often unmentionable—and frequently unforgivable.

Tal Como Somos (Just As We Are), a documentary film produced by UIC SPH Professor of Community Health Sciences Jesus Ramirez-Valles, PhD, shares the realities of living within a culture where daily life means being torn between love—as son, brother, father, friend—and stigma, or even exclusion, for being different.

This feature length documentary, which premiered at the Chicago Latino Film Festival in April and won 2nd place in the audience choice award, candidly examines the lives of six Latino men, one transgender woman, and the ties that bind them: their families and friends, their culture, religion, education/upbringing, and their experiences as adults. The film showcases their ordinariness and uniqueness while revealing their human-ness as individuals who live and love, wanting to live and be loved for who they are.

In addition to the feature-length documentary, Ramirez-Valles and his colleagues, including Lisa Kuhns, a former CHS student who received her PhD in May, have created a shorter version, along with a discussion guide to be used by educators. The purpose of the film and discussion guide is to address negative stereotypes about Latino GBT individuals through a straightforward portrayal of their everyday lives. In the film, several GBT individuals tell their stories to educate the larger Latino community about their

real lives, their struggles, and their hopes for the future. The film is based on scientific research on discrimination and its consequences among Latino GBT people.

In order to evaluate the discussion guide and educators' version of the film, Ramirez-Valles and his team went to a predominantly Latino and African-American high school on Chicago's West Side. They assessed the attitudes of the students towards GBT people and people with HIV before showing the film, and then returned later to re-assess them after they viewed the film and had a chance to think about what they saw.

"We saw a significant reduction in negative attitude (towards GBT people), particularly in boys," Ramirez-Valles said. "Their negative attitude towards people living with HIV was also slightly reduced."

The concept for the film emerged from Ramirez-Valles's book manuscript titled *Compañeros*. Ramirez-Valles has regularly published in major public health journals and has served on several editorial boards of scientific journals. In addition to a National Institutes of Health grant awarded for *Tal Como Somos*, he has been awarded previous research grants from the National Institutes of Health, the Rockefeller Foundation, as well as a Golden Apple for excellence in teaching. Ramirez-Valles grew up in Mexico, where he began a career in health communications. He directed and produced mass media campaigns on substance use prevention, sex education, and HIV/AIDS.

In Mexico, he attended the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey. In the U.S., he attended the University of Michigan, where he obtained both his masters and doctoral degrees.

Ramirez-Valles came up with the idea for the book, and later film, after looking around and seeing that there was a significant lack of educational materials about the subject targeting Latinos. The education is especially important in the U.S., where there is a stigma against GBT people, largely because of our resistance to talk about these issues, he said.

"Researchers have recently recognized the importance of stigma as a factor that diminishes a person's self esteem," he said. "Until now, we have addressed the people who have been stigmatized, rather than addressing the people who believe in the stigma."

Ramirez-Valles said that as a gay immigrant who grew up in Mexico in a Catholic family, he can relate in many ways to the lives of the men in the film.

"I hope the larger audience can also find a little bit of themselves in these individuals, like I do," he said.

Tal Como Somos has been selected for the International AIDS Conference, 2008, in Mexico City, Aug. 3-8 and for two additional film festivals: NewFest 2008: the New York LGBT Film Festival, June 5-15; and Frameline: San Francisco's International LGBT Film Festival, June 19-29. In addition, the PBS television stations in Chicago, New York and San Francisco will be airing the film in June. ■

To view a trailer, purchase a copy of the film, or for more information, go to <http://www.juneteenthproductions.com>.



Oscar, above, and Marcelo, below, two of the men portrayed in *Tal Como Somos*



- Stigma based on sexual orientation, commonly referred to as homophobia, has been found to be associated with depression, low self-esteem, and sexual risk behavior.
- Stigma based on sexual orientation may be stronger and have more severe consequences for Latino gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals than for their white counterparts because of the added stereotypes of race and immigration.

- Latinos represent about 14% of the U.S. population, but account for 20% of the total number of new AIDS cases.
- Despite the declining negative societal attitudes towards homosexuality over the last three decades, a majority of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in the U.S. still report experiences of stigma.