



Latino Positivo

In his film *Nuestras Caras, Nuestras Historias*, artist and activist **Samuel López** puts a human face on his community—HIV-positive Latino immigrants in Canada.

INTERVIEW BY ASTRID VAN DEN BROEK

Samuel López learned early in life about how tragedy can ravage a community. The son of a Baptist minister, López grew up in 1970s El Salvador, a country on the verge of a civil war that would last from 1980 to 1992. His father’s church, Emmanuel Baptist Church in San Salvador, had a clandestine involvement in Comadres, a human rights group formed by the wives, mothers and sisters of men who “disappeared” while struggling against the right-wing regime. As part of its work with Comadres, the church helped found an orphanage where some 100 children found refuge.

López and his parents were very much involved in the orphanage. “I still vividly remember one time as a teenager when we went to the mountains to rescue six siblings whose mother was dead and whose father had gone to war. It wasn’t easy—we had trouble with the directions—but eventually we found them,” he recalls. “We arrived during a battle and were nearly killed while saving them and bringing them back to the orphanage. It was terrifying. We were all living this

experience of a civil war, and so community devastation is something that’s quite easy for me to understand.”

Experiencing social injustice and violent repression in his homeland planted deep activist roots in López. Now, more than two decades later in a world away from the bloody conflicts that back then were tearing apart several countries of South America, the 41-year-old Toronto resident continues to stand up for people’s rights, passionately advocating for change. But today, instead of starting an orphanage, López does his part with a film lens, most recently by directing the 17-minute documentary film *Nuestras Caras, Nuestras Historias* (*Our Faces, Our Stories*). Initially created for screening at the 2008 International AIDS Conference in Mexico City, the film has continued to attract attention at film festivals in and around Toronto.

Simple in execution yet packing a punch, the film tells the stories of six people with HIV/AIDS (PHAs) who immigrated to Canada from Latin America. They speak of the stigma they often felt in their home countries because of

their HIV status and how within the Canadian health-care system and in the broader community HIV is more “normal.” Though there are growing and vibrant South American communities in many Canadian cities, the HIV-

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phobia and homophobia that can exist in Latino communities make it hard for Latino PHAs to feel welcome. (Several of the PHAs in the film are also gay, compounding their sense of isolation.)

As an HIV-positive gay Latino man who arrived in Canada in 1984, López can relate to many of the experiences



shared in the film. His own immigration story represents two waves of Latino immigrants who have come to Canada—the political exiles of the late 1970s and the more recent newcomers who left Latin America because of their sexual orientation.

Calling attention to the lack of services available to HIV-positive Latinos in Toronto and across the country is one goal López has for his film. There is a need for HIV-positive Latino peer counselors, he says. However, he points out that immigrant Latino PHAs often do not have the skills or experience to provide that support. And no wonder—the stigma and discrimination Latino PHAs face in their home countries often forces them to live in isolation and fear and can rob them of a chance to develop those skills. It is the same hostility and repression that drives them to emigrate.

Seeing the opportunity to make a difference, López and others have created Latinos Positivos Ontario, an advocacy group for Latino PHAs in the province. One goal of the group is to support and train Latino PHAs to be peer mentors.

Nuestras Caras, Nuestras Historias is not López's first foray into storytelling through film. In 1992, he produced *Samuel & Samantha on the Emancipation of All*, a documentary about the start of the gay Hispanic community in 1990s Toronto, narrated by López and his drag alter-ego Samantha. "I don't have a formal education in filmmaking," he says, "and I learn a lot from these projects."

His next work, a documentary that spun off from *Nuestras Caras, Nuestras Historias*, continues to examine themes of displacement and community. "It's called *El Cañaveral* (*The*

Sugar Cane Field) and it tells the tale of one man's arrival in Canada during the International AIDS Conference in Toronto in 2006 and the dramatic story of his struggle to gain refugee status here," says López, who is currently in search of funding to complete the project. "All those years ago in El Salvador my consciousness was born. And today when I see injustice, I'm still unable to handle it. I have to get involved." +

Astrid Van Den Broek is a Toronto-based freelance writer who's written for a number of magazines including *Chatelaine*, *Best Health*, *Canadian Living* and *More*.

SUPPORT FOR HIV-POSITIVE SPANISH SPEAKERS

Latinos Positivos Ontario is an advocacy organization specifically for (and run by) HIV-positive Spanish speakers. They are working to partner with The Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples (www.spanishservices.org or 416.925.2800) to develop programs for Hispanic PHAs in and around Toronto. Latinos Positivos Ontario can be reached through Toronto PWA Foundation, www.pwatoronto.org or 416.506.1400.

Montreal has its own Latino Positivo group, which is associated with AIDS Community Care Montreal (apoyo@accmontreal.org, www.accmontreal.org or 514.527.0928).