

Out of the Shadows, Into the Streets

by Christine Kenny

I first heard about La Marcha from a Mexican friend of mine who is a cook at a busy downtown Chicago restaurant. He told me that in order to attend the march none of the kitchen staff or busboys were going to work that Friday—and that his manager had excused them all for the day!

Later, as I went to Centro Romero, where I teach an ESOL class, I asked my friends in the office about the march and was excitedly handed a flyer by our community organizer, Evelyn. She was one of more than 50 organizers of La Marcha that would take place at Union Park on March 10th. She enthusiastically told me that “the city is planning for 5,000-10,000 people, but we are expecting 50,000.”

I made copies of the flyer for my students. But as I passed them out, their only question was, “How do you transfer from the red line to the green line to get to Union Park?” They ALL knew about the march, and most planned on attending—with their bosses’ permission.

This was amazing! How did all of my Latino friends know about La Marcha, and no one else had heard a peep? The Spanish radio stations had not only been promoting La Marcha, but had organized people to approach their employers to explain what was happening and to ask for the day off. The second busiest shopping district in



Immigrants' Rights March, Chicago, March 10th, 2006

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Chicago, La Villita, was *closed* for the day. Restaurants and factories *closed* in solidarity with their immigrant employees. Over 400 buses arrived at Union Park from the suburbs, and from as far away as Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, and Iowa.

As my friend and I waited to transfer to the green line five trains passed us by, too full to even open their doors. When we finally arrived at Union Park the march had already started. Peaceful demonstrators filled the streets. Mothers pushed babies in strollers. Fathers marched with toddlers perched on their shoulders. Orga-

nizations carried banners, and thousands of others full of excitement and hope made their presence known. Throughout the two mile route people hung out of office buildings waving signs and cheering on the crowd. Outside a church a sound system blared Los Tigres del Norte and the crowd erupted in a verse of “*De America, Yo Soy!*”

After four hours of marching at a snail’s pace the crowd was backed up blocks around Federal Plaza, where the rally took place. It was not until we turned on the news that evening that we learned that our law makers all stood in front of this enormous crowd and *promised* to support the immigrant community and to fight Sensenbrenner’s bill, HR 4437.

A community was politicized that day. Community activists from all parts of the country contacted the Chicago organizers to learn from their successful tactics. Since March 10th, when a crowd estimated to be as large as 300,000 took to the streets of Chicago, hundreds of thousands, if not millions more, have proudly stepped out of the shadows and into the streets with their message: “We are here and we are needed!” Their voice is also reaching politicians in a language they understand: “Today we march! Tomorrow we vote!”

The Bill That Passed the House: HR 4437

On December 16, 2005, the House of Representatives quietly passed an immigration bill, which, if enacted, would drastically change the face of our country. Passage of this bill into law would classify the estimated 12 million people living here without proper documentation as felons.

Anyone who “knowingly assisted” an undocumented immigrant would also be committing a felony. HR 4437 could criminalize church leaders, doctors, nurses, teachers, social services personnel—even the kind neighbor who offers a friend a ride to the market—as she would be considered a human trafficker.

The passage of this bill, as approved by the House of Representatives, prompted hundreds of thousands of people to step out of the shadows, peacefully shouting NO!

Discussion Questions

1. Why was there such a huge turnout for La Marcha?
2. What would make you “come out of the shadows and into the streets”?
3. How did the nation-wide marches help the immigrants in our country? What do you think the general American public thinks about them?
4. Have you ever participated in a political action such as a march? Did it make a difference?
5. What do you think are other ways to make your voice heard?
6. Do you think that people who are now undocumented immigrants should one day have the right to vote?

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