



The Power of Presence

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
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After the presidential election, much has been made of the impact of the Latino vote, shifting some of the national focus to issues that matter to this large and growing population sector. How this plays out on the public policy front remains to be seen; however, interest in tackling nagging and divisive immigration reform appears to be on the front burner.

Receiving less notice was pending legislation establishing the National Museum of the American Latino. A special commission, appointed by the President (George W. Bush, then Barack Obama) and Congress submitted its report in May 2011 calling for the creation of the museum. With the advent of a new Congress, authorizing legislation designating the museum as part of the Smithsonian Institution will likely be reintroduced this year. Most observers hope that this process will be handled with the same bipartisan spirit that greeted the 2011 report.

Given the Smithsonian Latino Center's commitment to preserving and promoting the historical, cultural and scientific contributions of Latinos in the U.S., I thought it would be useful to briefly describe what we are doing to further this work.

First, a comprehensive assessment of Latino collections, research, exhibits, public programs, and outreach efforts across the Institution was completed in 2012. This provided guidance on how we can build upon and maximize our strengths and holdings, where affirmative effort is needed to improve and enhance our resources, and what strategies are necessary to ensure access.

Secondly, a Latino curatorial initiative is in full swing that will dramatically increase the number of curators imbedded in our museums and research and program centers. Within a museum context, curators drive research, direct collecting efforts, lead exhibition development, and collaborate on correlative educational and public programs and web presence. They are key lynchpins in ensuring sustained Latino presence.

Thirdly, we are working to establish a Latino gallery on the National Mall. Any national Latino museum or cultural center is 12-15 years away from opening so in the meantime, we

believe it is critical to establish a physical Latino presence at the Smithsonian. This will allow us to utilize Smithsonian collections and expertise to best share the U.S. Latino story with millions of visitors each year.

The Latino Center is completing a strategic plan that will focus our energies on the three areas noted above, in addition to managing core leadership and professional development programs, completing ongoing exhibition projects and public programs, expanding the creative use of technology and new media, broadening outreach and marketing strategies, intensifying resource development efforts, and strengthening the capacity of our national board of directors—the operational infrastructure necessary to build upon for museum development purposes.

Maintaining current levels of service and establishing a new gallery on the National Mall is a full plate. Unwinding from time to time helps, especially with humor. The other day I thought I'd watch *Bowl of Beings*, a 1991 series of vignettes by the Latino comedy troupe, Culture Clash. In one of the sketches, Chuy (Mexican nickname for Jesús), our erstwhile Chicano activist and rabid San Francisco 49'ers fan, laments to a giant poster of Che Guevara that “the decade of the Hispanic turned out to be a weekend sponsored by Coors!”ⁱ There is great poignancy in Chuy's hilarious lamentation. It left me wondering if the Latino community's time on the national cultural scene had reached the proverbial tipping point. Will a weekend, or even a decade, do? What role will potential physical presence on the National Mall play? Many questions and challenges lay ahead.

When Chuy's 49'ers step out onto the football field, they play for keeps. In moving the national Latino cultural development agenda forward, so must we.

ⁱ *In the 1960s, leaders in the Chicano movement launched a boycott to protest hiring practices they considered discriminatory. It finally ended in 1977 after Coors settled a lawsuit brought by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission alleging the company had violated the 1964 Civil Rights Act. (Denver Post, 2007)*