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Interview with Conrad Mendoza

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Conrad Mendoza

INTERVIEW WITH CONRAD MENDOZA

M.A. student in Psychology

Conrad Mendoza is an MA student in Psychology, a full-time employee at the AIDS Support Network (ASN), and a volunteer with the Central Coast's Gay and Lesbian Alliance (GALA).

Moebius: Tell me about the AIDS Support Network and your work there.

CM: ASN was started around twenty years ago by members of the gay community. We provide free support services and counseling for people living with HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C. We have a small staff, eight full-time employees, and many more volunteers. ASN sponsors the Walk for Life in November, World AIDS Day and Eat Out to Save Lives in December (10% of net earnings go to ASN). We also sponsor Fusion, a gay young men's group. I do health counseling for monolingual Spanish speaking HIV/AIDS clients and health counseling for Hepatitis C clients. I've worked at ASN/SLOHEPC for four years.

Moebius: During that time, what trends have you observed in HIV/AIDS?

CM: HIV/AIDS is definitely not just a problem for gay men. It can affect people from all walks of life: straight, gay, male, female, and people from all ethnic backgrounds. At the same time, there's been a rise in HIV infection among younger gay men, mostly as a result of another huge problem: crystal meth abuse. There's still, unfortunately, not enough safer sex education and awareness, even in the gay community. There was a whole generation of gay men hit hard by AIDS in the 80s and 90s. A lot of those men could have been role models for gays coming out now, but the fact is, many of that generation are gone. Also, since the mid-90s, we've had too many media images of tanned, muscular guys "living with HIV"—climbing mountains and surfing. The new drugs that came in out in the mid-1990s did make HIV more manageable. They've helped a lot of people and saved lives. But the ads make HIV seem like no big deal. They don't tell you about the possible downsides. That guy climbing the mountain could be wearing an adult diaper, because the drugs can cause diarrhea. Or he might get to the top and have to lie down, because the drugs can cause severe dizziness.

Moebius: Tell me about your volunteer work with GALA.

CM: Well, I had been working at ASN, and I was approached about leading GALAS

youth group. Youth Group gives the kids a safe space to talk and not be judged. Teenagers generally are really questioning who they are, and queer youth even more so.

GALA wanted someone younger to do lead the group, someone the kids could relate to. I thought, why not? It would just be a few hours a week, and I hadn't started grad school yet. At first the group was just me and two kids. Then one of them moved away. I told the remaining girl that I would do it as long as she wanted, and she worked on getting more kids to attend, gradually building up the group. GALA had the idea to do our own youth conference, and I agreed to help organize it. At this point I was in grad school and working 40 hours a week, so I was pretty busy, but I saw that we could make a difference. The conference had a youth track and an educator/therapist track, and we also brought in panels of GLBT adults so the kids could see that being a successful, well adjusted GLBT adult was an attainable goal. That year, George Loomis was our keynote speaker. He had sued his school district for sexual discrimination and won. Last year we had Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon (the famous long-term lesbian couple from San Francisco) and we held our first Queer Prom. About 100 people attended. I was really honored to receive GALA's Volunteer of the Year in 2004, and *The New Times* included me in their issue on SLO's volunteers—although I hated the picture they took of me! It was awful!

Moebius: I remember. I thought, "Poor Conrad, he won't get any dates from that."

CM: Not that I volunteer to get dates, but hey...

Moebius: So how did you get interested in volunteer work initially?

CM: I've always done it, and I've kept on because volunteering is one of the things that's brought the most joy to my life. I've volunteered for different groups since I was a kid. I was in Lambda Chi Alpha here at Poly, and I know fraternities sometimes get a bad rap, but they also do a lot of volunteering and fundraising. Volunteering has always been something I've done; it's part of who I am. I've had to cut back recently because I'm working on my MA thesis, but I know I'll stay involved.

Moebius: What do you think about GLBT youth these days? Have things really gotten better for them?

CM: I think so. Their generation is more accepting of different sexual orientations, so I think many queer youth feel more empowered to stand up for themselves. GLBT youth don't just want tolerance, as in "we'll put up with you." They want acceptance, as in "we know you're as good as us." The young ones these days are more political. But there are still lots of problems. I mean, one year in youth group, there were three kids contemplating suicide. There were kids hating themselves because they felt like they had been born in the wrong body. Also, religion can still be a huge barrier to acceptance.

Moebius: I sometimes think it's an insurmountable barrier. How can you argue with

faith? If someone thinks they've been given direct access to God's intentions via their particular understanding of a sacred text, and thinks everyone should live according to that understanding or go to hell—well, they're probably not going to change their mind, no matter how many workshops or programs or parades there are. Well, that was a harangue...

CM: Hey, you said it! I agree with you. Some people aren't going to change their opinion. Maybe they should be written off. We have to keep trying, though. A lot of religious and spiritual people are open-minded.

Moebius: What led you to pursue an MA in Psychology?

CM: My undergraduate degree was in Kinesiology with a concentration in health counseling. After graduating from Cal Poly I worked at the Economic Opportunity Commission. I really liked the counseling aspect of that job. I also wanted to serve the gay community and Latino community. I thought, how can I build a career around all that? I didn't want to go into educational counseling. I'd had a bad experience with my counselors in high school. One actually told me to quit school because I'd never amount to anything. Fortunately, I heard about Project 2000, which helps Latinos applying to grad school. I didn't get into Cal Poly, but I got a conditional acceptance to a grad program in New Mexico. Conditional, because, well, my frat did a lot of volunteer work, but we also knew how to celebrate when the day was over! So combine that with a busy undergrad schedule, and getting grades that weren't so great... I needed to prove that I could handle grad work, so I took some classes at Cal Poly. I started in 2003, still working full time. Psychology professor Lisa Sweatt encouraged me to reapply to Cal Poly, and I got in. I feel really good because I'm the first in my family to graduate from college and now I'm the first to go to graduate school.

Moebius: Cal Poly and San Luis Obispo are not known as diverse. How do you deal with that, as an out gay Latino?

CM: Pint Night at Frog and Peach! Seriously, when I was thinking about applying for the job at EOC doing outreach to the SLO Latino community, my roommate joked, "You could stay at home and do that, because you are the Latino community." But seriously... SLO and Cal Poly are, yeah, not very diverse, and that makes it tough to address diversity issues. But in my classes I've felt comfortable bringing up GLBT and ethnicity issues. I think students and faculty are open to learning more about them. I became more political after the anti-gay marriage installation art display last fall. I mean, you had students comparing gay marriage to bestiality, and their professor allowed it. Come on! I saw how much work needs to be done. I got amazing support from people in my program. I actually got outed by the media—*The New Times* and KSBY. That led me to come out to some people in my family. There's a stereotype that Latinos are not accepting of gay people. But

that wasn't true for my family. I did something I tell people never to do—I came out to them at Thanksgiving dinner!

Moebius: Sort of, I'm gay—can you pass the...?

CM: Yeah, pretty much!

Moebius: You deal with such serious issues in your work and studies: disease, intolerance, creating social change. But you use humor so well to cope with them. How do you do it?

CM: I've had a lot of practice. There's been a lot of loss in my family; it's been a constant. But humor was always a constant, too. When things get rough, you have to find the humor in the situation, or you're going to crash. For example, after my brother died, we were all sitting around the kitchen, cracking jokes and making each other laugh. A neighbor came in and seemed shocked that we could laugh at a time like that, but that was how we got through it. The staff at ASN deals with people in crisis or struggling to cope, and we use humor as self-care—we're always making each other laugh with jokes and silly e-mails.

Moebius: There's been a tradition in the GLBT community of using humor to cope with a homophobic society.

CM: Exactly. You have to do it. You have to take time out to laugh. Find the lighter side of the situation, or at least laugh through the pain. It works. ☺

Interview on behalf of Moebius conducted by David Hennessee, Winter, 2006.