

Ethnic Pride, Civil Rights and Young People - Parallels Between The Chicano Walkout of 1968 and The Latino Demonstrations of 2006

By Paula Crisostomo

In March 1968, thousands of students walked out of high schools in East Los Angeles and the greater Los Angeles area. This was in protest against deplorable educational programs and a 50% drop out rate. I helped to lead those walkouts. This was the largest, organized demonstration by high school students in this country. The walkouts spread across the southwest.

The walkouts were initiated and led by Chicano college and high school students, with a lone teacher as our guiding force. We sought support for our cause from school administrators, politicians, parents and clergy before we walked out. With the exception of a very few, no support was given, until the walkouts were staged. Then, perhaps out of shame, community support came forth.

Over the past several months, we have witnessed an unprecedented mobilization by Latino immigrants through the US. The movement was triggered by a series of punitive legislative challenges targeting immigrants both at the state and federal level. A large part of this recent movement was the spontaneous walkouts by thousands of students. These students were moved to “do something” to demonstrate their passionate opposition to legislation that would affect their families. They were told by school personnel, politicians, parents and clergy – “don’t”, but they did. Their families soon joined them, as we saw entire families marching together through the streets of dozens of US cities.

While these protests took place almost 40 years apart from each other, they are linked by more than just the cultural and national ethnicity of its participants.

There is a lot of shame and pain, especially for a teen, to know that, because of your country of origin, because of the language your family speaks, because of your family’s educational attainment, you are not valued. This is despite the fact that you and your family work extremely hard, that you come from a two-parent family, that your parents’ hopes and dreams for you are the same hopes and dreams all parents have for their children.

Reclamation of power took place in both protests. It was more than just standing up for our rights. After years of being poorly treated and years of hearing from teachers, politicians and the media that we were destined to be undereducated, cheap laborers, we awoke and freed ourselves. It was about freeing ourselves of the limitations put upon us – limitations we accepted even though we knew it was unjust. We were demanding to be recognized. We were demanding to be included. It was reclaiming our self-respect, self-esteem, self-worth and our human dignity.

Today, we know that the long-term effects of the 1968 walkouts have produced thousands more college-educated Latinos, elected officials (including LA City Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and LA County Board Supervisor Gloria Molina), college and university professors and administrators, and film and television producers and directors.

Educational quality and equity for students of color remain an issue in this country and, I suspect, humane immigration reform will continue to be an issue for a long time to come.

I look forward with excitement to see how this new generation of youthful leadership will impact the course of this nation.