

Spanish-language radio drama tackles gay issues

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FRESNO, Calif. — A Spanish-language radio drama is aiming to break the silence surrounding homosexuality and its acceptance in California's rural communities, where thousands of agricultural workers toil in fields while listening to the radio.

The radionovela, "Bienvenidos a Casa," or "Welcome Home," which premiered Friday across the Central Valley, tells the story of Carlos, a Latino teen who is rejected by his friends and family for being gay then finds acceptance with his mother and neighbors.

The show will air for nearly two months on Radio Bilingue, a national Spanish-language radio network headquartered in Fresno. A gay-rights group is working to air the series nationally.

Activists say it's the first time information about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues is reaching rural Latino farmworker communities in a language and format that's accessible.

The three-episode radionovela, developed in collaboration with San Francisco State University and California Rural Legal Assistance, was based on input from community focus groups and performed by community volunteers.

Many Latinos grew up listening to radionovelas, which in some parts of Latin America are more popular than television and have inspired the creation of telenovelas – TV soap operas. The radio dramas depict life's struggles through recurring characters and themes. In recent years, short radionovelas have become an increasingly popular way to raise awareness of various issues among Latino audiences in the U.S.

"People identify with the characters," said Delia Saldivar, the Radio Bilingue station manager who helped develop the program about gay Latinos.

Some mainstream Latino media ridicule people with different sexual orientations, Saldivar said, creating a need for positive stories.

Saldivar teamed up with California Rural Legal Assistance's Proyecto Poderoso, or Project Powerful, to engage California's hard-to-reach rural Latinos. For the past three years, Proyecto Poderoso has provided legal services to gay, bisexual and transgender individuals in farmworker communities.

Program manager Dan Torres said the project has helped Latinos who were ridiculed, beaten or even fired from their jobs because of their sexual orientation. It also has shown the lack of resources, information and awareness about such issues in farmworker communities, where the fear of coming out is so much more intense, he said.

"These are small towns and people fear that they will experience discrimination, that their kids will be harassed," Torres said.

The "Welcome Home" story line was guided by research conducted by San Francisco State University's Family Acceptance Project and published in the January 2009 issue of *Pediatrics*.

The research found that higher rates of family rejection were significantly associated with poorer health outcomes among white and Latino lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults.

A young person who experiences high levels of rejection is more likely to attempt suicide, use illegal substances, or engage in risky behavior for HIV. The research also found that Latino men reported the highest number of negative family reactions to their sexual orientation in adolescence.

Jorge Sanchez, a researcher with the Family Acceptance Project,

said cultural issues make homosexuality a difficult topic among Latino families and communities.

"For Latinos, it's an open secret," Sanchez said. "There is silence about family issues, and that silence helps protect family harmony."

Latinos, especially in California, have a clear sense of discrimination, and they fear that children who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender may face more of it, Sanchez said.

"They say, I put up with enough hardship, I want my child to have an easier life; that's why we came to this country," Sanchez said.

Many Latino families change their behavior once they understand how rejection can harm their children, he said.

"Welcome Home" shows the possible negative impacts of rejection as well as the impacts of acceptance. Carlos is beaten up by friends for being gay, and he isolates himself from the family that rejects him. His mother's eventual acceptance and support help him come to terms with himself.

The radionovela also features a positive, loving relationship between two men, who live together and are respected and accepted by their families and communities.

Joseph Belmont, a Monterey, Calif., tutor, said he experienced ridicule and violence growing up in the rural town of Santa Maria.

"I had to go through a lot of self-destruction before my family tried to help and accepted me," he said. "I choose to speak about my sexuality now. I love my family and am grateful for the progress we made." #