



## Unflappable and Unstoppable: Three Decades of Activism

In 1997, Colin Higgins 2001 Courage Award winner Olga Orraca-Parades and her partner Liz Gallardo-Martin knew they would be featured prominently in an article for Puerto Rico's widely read *El Nuevo Dia* about National Coming Out Day, but they were a little nervous when they opened the Sunday edition to find a huge picture of themselves splashed across the front page. Overnight, they had literally become the poster children for the gay rights movement in Puerto Rico and potential targets of homophobic violence.

While they did encounter some harassment and a few of their friends were afraid they'd been outed by association, there was an overwhelming show of support.

"I can't tell you how many people told me how that article gave them the strength to come out to their friends and families. Many sat down to talk to their relatives holding the paper in their arms," said Olga.

Taking a courageous step to bring about equality for others was nothing new to Olga, who has dedicated her life to promoting social change in Puerto Rico and beyond. At the age of 14, she became active in her hometown of Bayamon, just outside of San Juan, by volunteering for organizations fighting for human rights and equality of economic resources. She soon found herself fighting for Puerto Rican independence.

In the 70's, she began her involvement in the feminist movement, a cause she still supports with vigor. But as an out lesbian, she often felt invisible in the movement and needed to devote her energies to a cause closer to her own identity. By the late 80's, she was a stronghold in the gay rights movement.

A natural leader, she was asked to serve on the Board of Directors of the Puerto Rican Coalition of Lesbians and Homosexuals, Puerto Rico's largest coalition of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights organizations. Under her service, the coalition started a help referral phone line for those seeking support for issues ranging from harassment to health care. Also during her tenure, the coalition began publishing *Sal Ba Fuea*, a magazine, which addressed issues of importance to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

In 1992, Olga helped to organize Encuentro, a gathering that brought together lesbian feminists from throughout Latin American.

Today, she serves on the Rainbow Pride Coalition, organizers of the annual pride march, which has grown from 200 marchers in 1989 to over 4,000 in recent years. She is also an active member of LLEGO, the National Latina, Latino Lesbian and Gay Organization.

For Olga, the greatest struggle for lesbians and gays in Puerto Rico is the repeal of Article 103, a sodomy law that was amended in 1974 to specifically include consensual acts between women.

“While this law is seldom used, having Article 103 on the books encourages hate and institutionalizes violence by the government,” explains Olga, who is very active in the Coalition Against Article 103. “As long as 103 is the law, people will feel it’s OK to harass and abuse lesbians and gays.”

Olga is most proud of her work as co-founder and coordinator of the Lesbian Creative Workshop. Founded in 1994, the group uses a variety of creative tools to address difficult topics for lesbians including domestic violence, substance abuse and health issues.

To address domestic violence, the group uses Forum Theater, a model developed by pioneering Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal to address oppressive conduct. From 10 to 20 women gather in a home or other safe space and watch as two women act out a fight that almost comes to blows. The drama is stopped and members of the audience are asked to step in and take over one of the roles and defuse the situation. The workshop has been so effective that the group is regularly asked by the community to put on the workshop.

If at one point Olga found it important to narrow the focus of her activism, today she’s casting a wider net and taking the gay rights message to other human rights struggles.

She and her partner recently joined a group of approximately 40 women to protest the US military base on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. “It was an amazing bonding experience,” said Olga. “These women were incredibly accepting of my partner and me, and very appreciative of our support.”

At 45, Olga is happy to finally be able to reconcile all of her activist identities. Far from feeling burnt out, after more than 20 years of fighting injustice, Olga views her life of activism as a privilege, grateful that her family has always been supportive of her lifestyle and proud of the changes she’s been able to help bring about in Puerto Rico and beyond.

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*To arrange to interview Colin Higgins Courage Award winner Olga Orraca, contact Paul Cates at Pro-Media Communications at 212/245-0510.*