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Activist gives her voice to immigrant causes

By GEORGIA PABST
gpabst@journalsentinel.com

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Christine Neumann-Ortiz stands five feet tall and speaks softly. But she's rallied thousands to march and raise their voices on behalf of immigrants and their rights.

As the founder and leader of Voces de la Frontera, she's become the leading grass-roots organizer and advocate for immigrant workers, and a lightning rod in the political firestorm around the issue of illegal immigration.

She's led busloads of people to Madison to protest a bill to deny illegal immigrants the right to drive, which passed and was signed into law by Gov. Jim Doyle. Now she's working on a demonstration Thursday called "A Day without Latinos" to show their economic impact by asking businesses to close and people to march in protest of efforts to crack down on illegal immigrants.

Day in and day out, Voces also works with people who stream into the south side storefront office on S. 5th St. to complain about issues of pay, discrimination and other workers' rights.

To many who work with Neumann-Ortiz in faith-, labor- and community-based organizations, she's considered passionate, hardworking and dedicated to her cause.

"Christine and her organization were very important in organizing the Coalition for Safe Roads by pulling together disparate groups," said Rob Shelledy, director of Catholic Social Action for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

"She's one of the few people doing true political advocacy at the grass-roots level, and she's really good," said state Rep. Pedro Colón (D-Milwaukee). "She doesn't pretend to be an insider. She's for immigrants who have become the new outcasts. Unlike the school choice people, she doesn't have zillions of dollars."

"I think she's brave for what she's doing because not many are willing to take a stand," said Ivan Gamboa, who ran George Bush's Hispanic outreach office in Milwaukee in 2004. "She realizes she may be in the minority, but she's willing to get her voice heard."

To others, she's a strident, divisive, sometimes disruptive voice in the halls of power.

State Sen. Cathy Stepp (R-Yorkville) called Neumann-Ortiz a terrorist and tried to get her prosecuted when she and three others went to Stepp's home to try to talk about her vote on the driver's license bill.

Jefferson County District Attorney David Wambach's office decided not to file charges against Neumann-Ortiz or Voces. A special prosecutor was named, after Racine County District Attorney Michael Nieskes recused himself because he donated to Stepp's campaign.

"It was a distraction from the bigger issue," Neumann-Ortiz said. "The bottom line is the DA refused to file charges. It was an effort to criminalize a Latino organization. It's where immigration rights and civil liberties intersect."

Neumann-Ortiz views the immigration movement as the modern civil rights movement, one becoming more radicalized as partisanship has grown. "The question is, which side are you on?" she said.

In the 1970s, Latinos in Milwaukee marched and organized, and a lot of social service agencies were created as a result of those efforts, she said. "Some of that tradition of organizing and advocacy has been lost, and we're struggling to rebuild it."

She acknowledges it's an uphill battle, but she believes support will build as the numbers grow.

"It's not just me. Many others are committed and angry, and there's a strong sense of social justice for immigrants who can't vote and need the support of those who do. . . . To many, immigrants are an expendable community, but they are real persons with real families who sustain the economy in construction, landscaping, restaurants and hotels, asbestos and other industries, but they have no vote and no voice," she said.

"I'm honored to have enough education and to grow up in the U.S. I can be a vehicle to the community and for the needs and aspirations of the immigrant community here. That's a role I'm happy to take."

She is a daughter of immigrants: Her father was born in Berlin, Germany; her mother in Mexico's Yucatan. Her father is an engineer who worked for UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, so the family moved a lot as she was growing up. She was born in Los Angeles but lived in Spain, Venezuela, Oregon and Alabama before Milwaukee. Her father is a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her mother is a bilingual teacher with Milwaukee Public Schools.

Neumann-Ortiz, 39, lives in Shorewood, where she raises a 15-year-old son.

She earned an English degree from UW-Madison and worked in Madison with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and Centro Hispano. She earned a master's degree in Chicano history from the University of Texas in Austin. There she helped start Voces de la Frontera (Voices from the Border) as a bilingual newspaper dealing with border issues.

In Texas, she said, she learned how worker centers are set up and tried to model that when she opened Voces as a largely volunteer organization here in 2001. It now has a budget of about \$200,000 a year, most of it from foundations.

Since 2002 she's worked at Milwaukee Area Technical College as coordinator for the GED program for migrants. In September she took a leave of absence from MATC to work full time at Voces.

The organization has expanded; it now claims 350 members with offices in Racine and Madison. It started a

speakers bureau to fan out and "tell the human story of immigration."

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