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04/30/2007: Businesses to close, rallies planned for A Day Without Latinos

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By Brent Killackey

Journal Times

RACINE — Roughly a dozen local businesses — from Taqueria Gran Morelos and Las Palmas to Alicia Villa Realty and the Dollar Store — won't open for business today.

The business closures are part of what's being billed as A Day Without Latinos, a march and consumer boycott for immigration reform. Nearly 100 business are expected to close in the Greater Milwaukee region, according to march organizers, Voces de la Frontera.

"The people are sending a strong message that we need and want a law passed this year that will address an outdated and discriminatory immigration system that is hurting and terrorizing working class families through raids and the politics of hate," said Christine Neumann-Ortiz, director of Voces de la Frontera.

Last year's May 1 event — the first of its kind and largely in protest of tough immigration measures proposed by U.S. Rep. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis. — drew thousands of people to the streets of Milwaukee.

Milwaukee again will be the site of this year's march and local participants will gather in Downtown Racine for a rally before departing for Milwaukee.

Approximately 200 Racine Unified high school students and 200-300 family members will board about 10 buses near Case, Horlick and Park High Schools about 7:30 this morning, according to Al Levie, a Horlick social studies teacher who serves as adviser to the student group Students United for Immigrant Rights.

The participants will head to Festival Hall, where they will disembark and march to the office of U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis. Then, the group will head to Monument Square for an 8:15 a.m. rally before boarding the buses and heading to Milwaukee for a noon march and rally.

Levie said the students need parental permission slips to participate, although it wasn't an official school trip.

"Most of their parents will be with them," Levie said. "This is not a student thing. It's a community thing."

Immigrants play a critical role in the economy and the recent immigrant raids and tougher driver's license requirements were seen a slap in the face in terms of their contribution, Levie said.

"The whole gist is immigrants need to be appreciated — not punished — for their contribution

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to our society," Levie said.

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Viviana Pastrana, a senior at Horlick and president of Students United for Immigrant Rights at Horlick High School, planned to join the march today with her parents, sister and family friends.

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Pastrana's visa allows her to live and attend school in the United States, but it doesn't allow her to work. She can't afford to attend the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee or the University of Wisconsin-Parkside without a job. The process of trying to get her status changed to allow her to work could take a year or many years, she said.

She will be returning to Mexico later this year to attend college.

Pastrana said she would like to become a U.S. citizen, but the only thing on her mind right now is getting permission to work.

She's also marching against strict driver's license requirements that prevent illegal immigrants from getting licenses, greater access to higher education for immigrants and an end to deaths at the United States-Mexico border.

Alicia Villa, owner of Alicia Villa Realty, Victory Mortgage Services and Villa Investments Inc., will be close her businesses and allow employees to participate in the Milwaukee march.

"Yes, I am going to be closing my office on that day and I'll be marching in support of the immigrants," Villa said.

Villa, a U.S. citizen and an immigrant, and she supports other immigrants.

"I see a lot of inhuman activities going on, those things that separate families from children," Villa said.

She said she looks at immigration as an economic issues — and the contribution of immigrants are often overlooked.

"We want the government to understand we are part of this economy," Villa said.

She said she feels immigrants who are trying to make a living — and not those causing trouble — should be given the chance to realize their dream of becoming U.S. citizens.

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