

Interview with Imelda G Cortez

Raye Winch (RW): Imelda G Cortez is a brown queer and proud organizer and educator dedicated to supporting the Wakefield neighborhood where she has lived most of her life. Imelda, you live and work in the same neighborhood where you grew up and you teach in the same school where you graduated. Can you share what you like the most and why do you stay?

Imelda G Cortez (IGC): What I love most about the Wakefield Neighborhood is that it has always been a welcoming environment for me. An environment where I feel at home. It's where I grew up, where I learned to ride a bike. Fortunately, I have had the privilege of traveling to different places, but I always like to return to the neighborhood. Always when I am getting off the Freeway at 6th Ave, it's like a break, I can breathe.

RW: You describe yourself as an accomplice. What does it mean to you?

IGC: Students have a very great power that they cannot always see. I try to be that person who helps them and motivates them to make a social change, no, in what way everything we all want, but we don't always know how to do it

RW: Can you share an example?

IGC: Ah yes. I have a student specifically who is gay, who identifies as gay, and he used the women's bathroom. The girls didn't say anything to him, he wasn't doing anything. And there was a time when a teacher thought that this student who is gay was in the bathroom having sex with another student. This wasn't not true. So we decided, the students decided rather, to have a bathroom where, gender doesn't matter. That's what we have at home, it's a bathroom, a bathroom is a bathroom. So we made one of the bathrooms so that anyone can enter regardless of gender and that was a very big victory for the students.

RW: You are an LGBTQ person and you are open about this at school. Why did you decide to do this?

IGC: Yes, ah, to return to Pueblo I always said, I want to be that person that I always needed when I was at Pueblo. When I was there as a student, I would have wanted the teachers to feel free from themselves and say to us "I am gay, I am whatever," no, and for me it has always been very important in my way of being. I want the young people to see themselves in someone older than themselves. Because it is important for young people to have that, that vision that maybe right now they are not in a very good environment for them but that they see that if you can create your own environment and create your own life outside of social stigmas.

RW: One of the lessons you teach students is to question what it means to behave well. Can you talk more about this?

IGC: Yes, as Mexican people, I grew up in a Mexican family, I consider myself Chicana, they always taught us that women have to be certain things, obey the teachers, we cannot answer. And I think that these things are not always good or they are not always things that help others. So I want the young people to challenge society, challenge their parents if that's the case, right? Because sometimes parents don't always teach us things that help them, so for me it is important that they know the power they have and that it is okay not always to go with the flow or not always to go with what society says.

RW: You have a very strong commitment to your neighborhood. What do you want to share with those who think they have to go out to be successful?

IGC: One message I would like to give to others is that you don't have to leave the neighborhood to improve. You don't have to go looking for something better, but you can create that thing that is better for you. I hope that everyone understands that we have the power to create and recreate the things that make them well, the things that will improve our lives and the lives of others.