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MEXICAN HERITAGE, GAY IDENTITY SHARE FESTIVAL SPOTLIGHT

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Memo: MARCELA DAVISON AVILES is president and CEO of Mexican Heritage Corp. and executive producer of the San Jose Mariachi and Mexican Heritage Festival. She wrote this article for this newspaper.

For those of us in the gay community, the past year has been one of transformative contradictions. Friends we thought we could count on abandoned us; enemies historically aligned against gay rights embraced us. Proposition 8 was both a great divider and the catalyst for people on the right and the left to find common ground on the issue of marriage equality.

As the gay marriage cases wind their way through the courts, public opinion continues to grow in support of gay marriage. The litigation and resulting media coverage have profoundly impacted attitudes; Judge Vaughn Walker's opinion is based on a finding of fact that reveals not only the legal basis for the constitutional issues, but also the human issues that form the basis for the constitutional claims. How was this achieved? Because the judge told the human side of the story in simple, evocative prose.

Telling the human side of the story: Since time began, that is the way common ground is revealed. In San Jose, the annual Mariachi and Mexican Heritage Festival has become a platform for revealing the human side of the cultural contradictions gay Latinos balance daily in their journey to claiming both their Hispanic heritage and self-identity.

In 2009, the festival presented the film "La Mission" to a sold-out crowd and hosted a community conversation about the father-and-son story. Tonight, the 2010 festival presents another father-and-son story -- Dan Guerrero's moving one-man show, "Gaytino!" (For schedule, go to <http://sanjosemariachifestival.com/schedule.php>.)

These presentations bring communities together not just to be entertained but to examine through art the meaning of our lives, and to find, through culture, a haven for our emotions. The human impact of a father's denial of his son's gay identity -- "La Mission" -- and the wisdom gained through a son's journey of pain, discovery and celebratory emergence from the bright light of his father's legacy --

"Gaytino!" -- are stories of family struggle that are universal. But they are not often told outside of family. That is where cultural festivals such as ours can be of service.

Festivals bring us together and make us better acquainted than we otherwise would be. As Lincoln once noted in his remarks about state fairs, "from the first appearance of man upon the earth, down to very recent times, the words 'stranger' and 'enemy' were quite or almost, synonymous. The man of the highest moral cultivation ... likes him whom he does know, much better than him whom he does not know."

Festivals help correct "the evils which spring from want of sympathy ... among strangers," and fulfill "one of the highest functions of civilization."

Festivals sing our humanity. They do so with harmony that creates meaning from these contradictions of our times. And during times such as these, when the entire nation seems to be playing a scene from "My Big Fat Gay Wedding," the Mexican Heritage Festival reminds us of our shared origins and eases the pain caused by controversy -- whether the subject is immigration or gay marriage.

Interestingly, at one of our festival panel discussions, the lecturer noted that some people believe the basis of the word "marriage" is shared by the word "mariachi." Makes sense, considering the ubiquitous presence of mariachi music at Hispanic weddings, gay and straight. If that is the case, then two forms of the most joyful expressions we know may also remind us, in the words of Gertrude Stein, that we are all gay, and we can learn the little things in being gay, and share the common right that marriage conveys of being, quite regularly, gay.