A Strong, but Divisive, Voice for Immigrants; Boycott of Pr. William Will Test Leader

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Body

Twelve years ago, Ricardo Juarez was an unemployed government clerk standing in the dark on a riverbank outside Eagle Pass, Tex. He had no particular American dream in mind, he says, no vision of white picket fences or the Liberty torch. The youngest male in a family of 12 siblings, Juarez was mostly thinking about food. He and a group of other migrants set their inner tubes into the swirling blackness of the Rio Grande and let the current carry them across.

Juarez washed up in Woodbridge two weeks later. His brother Alex helped him find work in construction -- digging ditches, lugging sacks of cement, driving nails. Prince ***William*** County was booming. But Juarez was more eager to organize ***immigrant*** laborers than be one.

Now 40, Juarez has become one of the Washington region's most visible -- and ***divisive*** -- Latino figures. His organization, Mexicans Without Borders, claims more than 3,500 regional members, and it is the largest and best-organized group opposing recent efforts by Prince ***William*** and other area jurisdictions targeting illegal ***immigrants***.

But the biggest ***test*** of Juarez's leadership begins today. Juarez and his group have organized a week-long ***boycott*** in Prince ***William*** in protest of an anti-illegal immigration resolution unanimously approved by county supervisors July 10. The resolution has not been finalized, but its goal is to repel illegal ***immigrants*** by refusing them access to certain public services and to increase deportations by ordering more aggressive residency checks by police.

Juarez -- who refuses to disclose his residency status -- calls these policies "a new apartheid" and "racist." And in a move Juarez's critics say is typical of his overheated rhetoric, radical politics and ***strong***-arm style, the businesses in the county subject to the ***boycott*** ***will*** be those lacking green placards provided by Mexicans Without Borders. Hispanic-owned or not, any business without one ***will*** be shunned.

Juarez defended this with-us-or-against-us approach in interviews last week, as his group printed more than 500 of the placards for delivery to shops, restaurants and other businesses.

"We feel like we've been backed into a corner, that no one is listening to us," Juarez said. Stung by the harsh rhetoric of the resolution's backers, Hispanic ***immigrants*** feel rejected, unappreciated and ignored, he said. "We don't expect the resolution to be rescinded, but we want the ***boycott*** to give us our ***voice*** back."

Increasingly, though, the sound of Juarez's ***voice*** -- at churches, rallies and outside government buildings -- is making county officials and others cringe. Shortly after the July 10 resolution, Juarez and his group organized three town hall-style "assemblies," the largest of which drew more than 1,000 people to a Manassas church.

Many ***immigrant*** families were confused and frightened by the resolution. And in a county where one-fifth of the population is Hispanic but there are no elected Hispanic officials and no major Hispanic advocacy organizations, Juarez offered reassurance, unity and a plan. The crowds at the assemblies voted for a march, a one-day general strike and the week-long ***boycott***. Said Juarez, "They gave us their vote of confidence to lead this process."

Membership in Mexicans Without Borders is not limited to Mexican nationals, drawing ***immigrants*** from El Salvador, Guatemala and other Latin American countries -- particularly the region's most recent arrivals. But several prominent members of the county's more established Hispanic community and others who also oppose the resolution are unnerved by Juarez's growing sway. Some are Salvadoran ***immigrants*** who came in the 1980s to escape civil war. Others include Hispanic "pioneers" who built successful businesses in areas where few Latinos lived.

With more to lose, they worry Juarez's confrontational tactics ***will*** backfire and a ***boycott*** ***will*** heighten racial tensions and harden divisions.

"I think it's premature," said Jose Luis Semidey, a U.S. citizen born in Venezuela who owns real estate offices in the Manassas area and is working with other local Hispanic businessmen to chart a more cautious course, saying they'll oppose the resolution through lobbying and legal challenges if necessary. "I don't think the ***boycott*** is going to amount to much."

The ***boycott*** wasn't even on the radar of the Prince ***William*** County-Greater Manassas Chamber of Commerce, as Chairman Rick Hendershot said none of the chamber's 1,100 members had contacted him about it.

In other official circles, Juarez is already a pariah, viewed by county supervisors as a fire-breathing rabble-rouser who has created an undue sense of alarm among Prince ***William***'s Hispanic residents.

"He is not a moderate ***voice***," said Board of County Supervisors Chairman Corey A. Stewart (R-At Large). "I see him as an extremist who is hurting the entire Latino community by whipping them up into this anger and trying to convince them that this is a racist measure."

Even the group's name, Mexicans Without Borders, seems to confirm residents' fears about illegal immigration, Stewart said. "The name makes me think they don't believe there should be any controls to stop people from coming in illegally."

Juarez said he recognizes that countries must have borders but rejects the notion that a person can be "illegal." He repeatedly declined to answer questions about his own residency in the United States. "I think it should be a private matter," he said, saying he was under no legal obligation to discuss his status. "One of the messages we're trying to send is that a person's identity should not have to be revealed publicly."

Juarez's path from the banks of the Rio Grande to the frontlines of the region's immigration fight began, as he tells it, in Coatepec Harinas, the mountain town where he grew up two hours southwest of Mexico City. Juarez's father died when he was 4, leaving a 17-acre plot of farmland to Juarez's mother and 11 siblings. As a teenager, Juarez listened to the Beatles, played bass guitar in a rock band and, as photo albums show, tried hard to style himself in the likeness of Jim Morrison.

Juarez never finished college and was laid off from a public relations job at the National Institute of Anthropology and History in 1994. He returned home to the family farm just as the Mexican peso crisis plunged the country into financial turmoil.

"We were struggling," Juarez said, blaming Mexican government corruption and powerful U.S. interests for the crisis. "Our produce became worthless. There were no jobs anywhere."

But there were jobs in Woodbridge, evidenced by the money Juarez's brother Alex wired home to the family. Alex invited him to Virginia, and a week later, Juarez reached the Rio Grande.

Today, Juarez and his wife, Patricia, live with Alex, his wife and their three children in a two-story Woodbridge home. A photo of early 20th-century Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata hangs in the den, casting a burning stare from beneath a large sombrero.

Zapata's modern-day acolytes, the leftist rebels of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, have shaped Juarez's worldview and inspired his organizational strategies -- minus the ski masks and AK-47s. Although Juarez certainly does not advocate armed struggle in the Virginia suburbs, he has worked with Zapatista-affiliated activist organizations, according to Juarez and Web sites, and shares the rebel group's contention that U.S. free-trade polices hurt Latin America's poor and drive emigration.

Of course, Juarez's battles don't transpire in the jungles of Chiapas but in the parking lots of Virginia 7-Elevens, where day laborers gather to solicit work. He and several activist friends formed Mexicans Without Borders in 2000, he said, primarily to assist and advocate for the rights of ***immigrant*** workers who were cheated out of wages, injured or in legal trouble.

After authorities moved against day laborers in Woodbridge in 2005, Juarez and his group led protests, then rallied against proposed federal restrictions on illegal immigration the following year. When Manassas tried to tighten its residential overcrowding rules -- prompting a federal investigation -- Juarez again led the fight. Mexicans Without Borders now has affiliate subgroups in Baltimore, the Virginia towns of Culpeper and Harrisonburg, and other places across the region.

At a shopping plaza in Manassas last week, Juarez gathered about 40 people for a bus caravan to a Falls Church rally. Maria Rivas, a 32-year-old illegal ***immigrant*** from El Salvador, had arrived with her two U.S.-born daughters, ages 9 and 6. The girls played a fantasy game, speaking to each other in flawless, unaccented English, as their mother explained in Spanish that the new resolution had left her daughters worried their parents would be deported.

"They're young, but they know what's going on," Rivas said, adding that the girls had urged their mother to help Juarez. "We have to support him," she said. "He's a ***leader***, and he's the only one we have."

Graphic

IMAGE; By Kevin Clark -- The Washington Post; Ricardo Juarez, right, with the Rev. Jorge Acho, at a protest last week in Falls Church of Prince ***William***'s immigration crackdown.

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