

NEWS

Marin Organizing Committee has coming-out party in San Rafael

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Gilbert Mejia, an 18-year-old Novato boy whose family has been at the center of an immigration rights controversy in Marin the past several months, told 1,100 people packed into the San Rafael High gym on Sunday that the upstart Marin Organizing Committee can be a powerful forum for those who are forced to “live in the shadows.”

Mejia received a standing ovation after he spoke about his family’s dilemma at the Marin Organizing Committee Founding Convention. Heads of nonprofits, religious congregations and local and state government shared the podium with Mejia, whose undocumented parents are scheduled to be deported to Guatemala on Nov. 2. He was born in Guatemala and is undocumented himself but safe from deportation until a hearing in July 2010.

Saying that he was speaking for the county’s undocumented Hispanic population, he said, “We are rarely heard from and are forced to live in the shadows even though we work, we pray and we study just like every other human being here.”

The Marin Organizing Committee, founded in 2005, is a nonpartisan conglomerate of delegates who were essentially staging a coming-out party Sunday. Saying they were “standing for the common good,” the organizers hope to influence political leaders to pay attention to issues that are important to Marin’s diverse community.

Among the committee’s goals are a permanent homeless shelter, greater accountability of county mental health funds, affordable housing, fair care at local hospitals, immigration rights and helping senior and teens in need.



“I’m exhilarated,” said Rabbi Lavey Derby of Tiburon’s Congregation Kol Shofar, who co-chaired the convention with pastoral associate Vicky Otto of St. Raphael Catholic Church in San Rafael.

“There were some historic moments here, and it felt wonderful,” Derby said. “The government works so much better when people are involved and all are represented. ... We hope politicians will come to see us as a partner in government to help solve problems.”

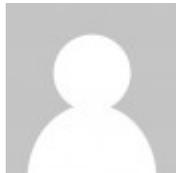
Political leaders in attendance included Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, Marin County Supervisor Steve Kinsey and members and candidates for the San Rafael City Council.

“The more people participating in government, the better the government will be,” Kinsey said.

Suzanne Walker of the St. Vincent de Paul Society said she has been working on homeless shelter issues for two years and said she was encouraged to hear the willingness of politicians to listen to the Marin Organizing Committee.

“Two years ago we had some of our supervisors said homelessness wasn’t an issue for their constituents,” she said. “People coming out and publicly telling their stories about it is so important. To be finally be heard and feel as if there will be a real working relationship is amazing.”

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