



## **Richard Zaldivar**

### **Biography**

Richard Zaldivar is the founder and executive director of The Wall Las Memorias Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting wellness and preventing illness among Latino populations affected by HIV/AIDS. Combining HIV/AIDS education and prevention, sensitivity to the spiritual needs and religious beliefs of its clients and supporters, and a commitment to social justice, The Wall under Zaldivar's leadership has been in the forefront of the fight against HIV/AIDS in Los Angeles and beyond.

As executive director, he oversees programs that reach out to Latino populations in the Los Angeles area, including men who are gay, bisexual and MSM, communities of faith and the general public. The Wall Las Memorias Project is noted for several highly visible endeavors, including construction of the nation's first publicly funded AIDS monument in the U.S., hosting of Strike Out AIDS, the first-ever AIDS awareness day at Dodger Stadium, and leadership in the fight against crystal methamphetamine use.

A native of Los Angeles, Zaldivar began his career in public service at the age of 17 when, as president of a local youth group, he organized community meetings to help youth learn more about issues such as substance abuse, develop leadership skills and get involved in their community. He went on to work in the office of legendary City Councilman Art Snyder as a field deputy, carrying on that tradition of community service for many years. It was there that he led and coordinated the effort to save Cathedral High School from closure and demolition.

He later served as a community liaison for then Los Angeles City Attorney James K. Hahn. At the same time, he organized youth and senior citizen support groups, and co-produced a local radio talk show. In recognition of his leadership skills, he was elected as one of the youngest appointees to the National Democratic Convention Platform Committee in 1980, participating in the Latin America Foreign Policy subcommittee.

Zaldivar's passion and determination in the fight against HIV/AIDS comes from a lifetime of public service and community empowerment and mobilization. His personal battle with addiction and commitment to sobriety also fuels his passion, creativity and drive to address the shame, silence and denial that fuel HIV transmission, homophobia and social injustice.

It was his vision and singular voice that organized and led a community to fight city hall and prejudice to construct the nation's first publicly-privately funded AIDS monument.

In 1993, recognizing the lack of effort being made to educate Latinos about HIV/AIDS and the cultural barriers that made education and outreach efforts seemingly insurmountable,

Zaldivar organized the first annual *Noche de las Memorias* or Evening of Memories on World AIDS Day. That night, he brought together, friends, family, community residents and leaders and clergy and shared with them his vision for an AIDS monument to memorialize those lost to AIDS and offer a place to remembrance and healing.

More than ten years later, in 2004, staff, board members and supporters of The Wall Las Memorias Project brought together 1,400 people to celebrate the unveiling of the monument and the names etched on its granite walls. Designed in the shape of Quetzalcoatl, an Aztec serpent and symbol for rebirth, The Wall Las Memorias is composed of eight panels, six with murals by Southern California artists and two granite panels that will eventually display the names of 8,000 people lost to AIDS. Located in Lincoln Park, the 9,000 square foot monument includes a stainless steel archway.

Under his leadership, The Wall Las Memorias Project has developed innovative programs to reach out to key Latino populations and institutions. He developed an AIDS prevention program, the Latino Men's Group to give gay and bisexual men a supportive environment to discuss the issues facing them, explore their identity and develop self-esteem and confidence. To date, the Latino Men's Group has had a profound effect on the lives of more than 1,500 men.

Zaldivar has long recognized the role that faith and spirituality in the lives of many individuals and families affected by HIV/AIDS. The organization's *Project Faith* reflects his sincere belief that communities of faith must be a part of the prevention, education and treatment equation. Through his and others' grassroots efforts, Latino faith-based institutions in Los Angeles have been and are continuing to be organized and mobilized in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Because of his professional achievements and his personal triumphs, Zaldivar is often invited to participate as a motivational speaker and presenter at conferences, workshops and colleges and universities on topics ranging from HIV/AIDS to organizing and mobilizing communities to overcoming personal obstacles to making personal dreams come true.

Zaldivar has continued to serve his community on several advisory boards, including the Training Advisory Board of the National Council of La Raza-Cal State Long Beach Center for Latino Community Health, Education and Leadership, the Capacity Building Division Advisory Board of the U.S. Office of Minority Health Resource Center and the RAND Corporation's Urban Congregations and HIV/AIDS Project. In 2000, he served as Co-Chair of the National AIDS Prevention Summit and is the former co-chair of the Los Angeles County HIV Prevention Planning Committee where he served six years as a member.

His leadership on HIV/AIDS has been recognized by local, national and international institutions for more than a decade. He was named as one of 100 most influential lesbian or gay persons in 1997 by *Out* magazine. In 2005, KCET Television and Union Bank honored him with the "Local Hero Award" for his leadership in the community. Later in 2005, he received a sabbatical award from the California Wellness Foundation in recognition of his leadership in HIV/AIDS. Most recently, Richard was selected to serve a three-year term as part of a council of U.S. American advisors to the president of Mexico (Consejeros por Meritos y Trayectoria).