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Gay-rights activists seek change at conference in Denver

By Colleen O'Connor
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Years of struggle have taught Dolores Huerta, the legendary Latina labor leader, to wrestle good news from bad.

"I want to say to the gay-rights movement that it is time for everyone to step back and think of all the publicity that Proposition 8 got all over the country," Huerta said of the voter-approved effort to ban same-sex marriage in California.

The longtime civil-rights activist will be the keynote speaker at the annual meeting of gayrights activists, Creating Change, which starts in Denver today and is expected to draw more than 2,000 people. Huerta's address is Thursday.

"If it hadn't been on the ballot, it wouldn't have gotten that kind of publicity. Sometimes you have to step back to go forward."

The loss, she believes, will force activists to organize — a key topic at the convention.

"Her whole life's work is very much about building grassroots power, particularly among farmworkers, but that kind of organization really resonates with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and its conference," said conference director Sue Hyde.

Huerta's fight for social justice is not without personal sacrifice — the mother of 11 was torn between work and family — and it has landed her in jail more than 20 times.

It also put her in the hospital.

During a protest in 1988 against the policies of then-presidential candidate George H.W. Bush, she was beaten by San Francisco police, suffering broken ribs and a ruptured spleen.

The emotional wounds took longer to heal than the physical ones. But now, as usual, she focuses on the positive.

"That beating put me out of commission for a while," she said, "but on the other hand it renewed my faith in the power of nonviolence. A lot of good things came out of that beating. The San Francisco City Council passed an ordinance that prohibited police from attacking crowds without a crime being committed."

Huerta, 78, remains indefatigable in her battle for civil rights.

"She's like the Energizer Bunny," says daughter Alicia Huerta. "She does 12 events a week, ranging from lectures at grade schools to labor rallies and press conferences. She's on the go all the time."

Now a grandmother of 14, with six great-grandkids, Huerta was born during the Great Depression

in a small mining town in northern New Mexico.

She was 3 when her parents divorced, and her mother moved to California to create a new life in the fertile San Joaquin Valley, home to migrant workers and farmers.

Her mother worked two jobs to support the family — waitress by day, cannery worker by night. Eventually, she bought a 70-room hotel and a diner.

"I was raised on the edge of skid row," Huerta said. "Different people would come into the restaurant, and my mother was never disrespectful to anyone."

Years later, Huerta discovered her mother often let farmworkers live in her hotel because they had no other place to stay.

"We were shocked to learn people were living there and not paying rent," Huerta said.

In 1955, influenced by her mother's philosophy, Huerta was working as an elementary school teacher in Stockton, Calif., when the plight of the farmworkers' children — hungry, with tattered clothing — so upset her that she quit to tackle poverty more directly.

She co-founded a chapter of the Community Service Organization, a Mexican-American group that sought to register voters and persuade local governments to fund neighborhood improvements.

In 1962, she teamed with labor leader Cesar Chávez to focus on the rights of agricultural workers. Eventually, they founded the United Farm Workers of America, where she became the main negotiator on historic legislation, including disability insurance for farmworkers, voting ballots in Spanish and public assistance for resident immigrants.

As for herself, Huerta learned the difficulty of juggling marriage, motherhood and career. "We went to work with her," said daughter Alicia, who still works with her mother on community organizing at the Dolores Huerta Foundation in Bakersfield, Calif.

"We were living on farms and joining the picket lines. We were the picket lines, the family was so large."

As a coalition-builder, Huerta was on the front lines of the first gay-rights marches in both San Francisco and West Hollywood, along with her kids and crowds of supportive farmworkers. She also testified at hearings about discrimination against gays.

After 53 years in the field of organizing, Huerta has noticed how the landscape has changed — grown broader but not always deeper.

"We have a lot of groups, like silos, but not a lot of cross-fertilization between the organizations," she said. "I think we need to hook up joint forces of people who are working on different progressive issues, like gay rights, immigrants' rights, pro-choice, the peace and anti-war movements. People need to come together."

When she speaks this week in Denver, she will spread the same message she works into all her speeches: the importance of marriage equality and gay rights. She'll quote 19th-century Mexican President Benito Juárez.

"He said, 'Respecting other people's rights is peace,' " she said. "This is about human rights."