

Web project targets Latino stereotypes

By Yvonne Wingett
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PHOENIX — A middle-age Hispanic man pushes a mower across the lawn of a giant home in an affluent neighborhood. A middle-age white woman pulls up driving a BMW.

"Can you please come here *por favor*," she said, sticking her head out the window. "I was wondering how much you charge to landscape this home?"

The man stops and asks: "Why would I charge to landscape my own yard?"

She blushes and drives off. The commercial clip later freezes and an on-screen message appears: "I am an American."

The commercial is being filmed for a new Web site created by two 30-something Phoenix Republicans frustrated by the political rhetoric over illegal immigration. Inspired by the recent pro-immigrant student walkouts, marches and demonstrations in Phoenix, Bettina Nava and Max Fose launched www.iamaproudamerican.com.

It aims at breaking down stereotypes some people have about Hispanics through at least four short commercials. Links to government sites and civic organizations encourage people to become politically active by helping them register to vote, find elected officials and write letters to the editor.

This week, they said they sent their message to 2 million registered voters via e-mail.

"I'm concerned that this anger over illegal immigration is turning into possible discrimination against Latinos," said Fose. "It's wrong, and we have an obligation as Americans to say this is wrong. The marches have shown that there are hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people that feel the same way Bettina and I do."

The two are not political novices. Nava is a political consultant, and Fose is a Web designer who created a campaign site that helped Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain in his 2000 presidential run. They met in 1993 while working for McCain and became friends.

The Proud American project was born over back-yard barbecues in Phoenix, where lately the topic of illegal immigration has dominated. They said they had grown tired of the back-and-forth between politicians and frustrated over simplistic assumptions some people have about Hispanics.

They wondered how they could challenge those stereotypes: that anyone with brown skin must be a maid, landscaper, nanny or gang member.

"We took our talents we had, and asked ourselves, 'How can we reach the most people possible, and have a conversation about this?'" said Nava, a third-generation U.S. Latino.

Fose could create a Web site. Nava could use her perspective as a Latino to write the message. Fose could take voter lists, match them to e-mails and send them out. They could use the real-life experiences from their friends as commercials—the law-enforcement officer who had been mistaken by the blonde in a BMW for a landscaper, for example, or the marketing professional and mother of two who had been mistaken by another mom as a nanny.

And Nava could tell her own story: the time a few weeks ago at a swanky hotel when a shuttle bus driver told her she couldn't get on because it was for guests only, not employees.

They hired a local production company to find actors and shoot the commercials. They will spend \$20,000 to \$30,000 of their own money on the project, they estimated. This week, they will blast 2 million registered voters across the country, including 160,000 in Arizona, with advertisements for their site, which they are still tweaking. They plan on posting the commercials at the end of May.

"We're hoping it's edgy [and] it's controversial," Nava said. "I don't know what the impact this endeavor's going to have in the end, but we couldn't sit back and hear this rhetoric. It really came down to, do we do nothing, or do we do something. I hope it causes people to pause, and question stereotypes."