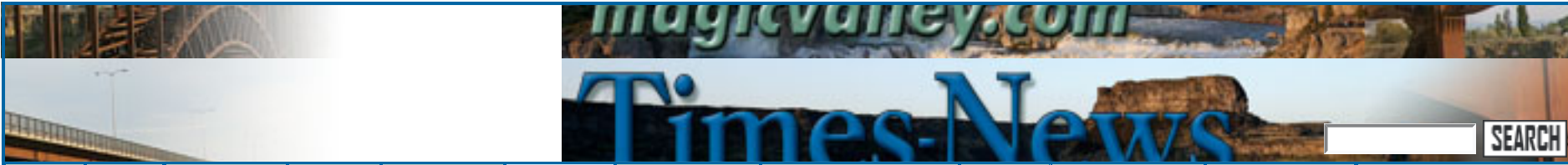


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# NEWS

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## Rally for human rights Activists defend immigrants on MLK holiday

By Cassidy Friedman  
Times-News writer

RUPERT - No one remembers the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. for his anger.

Least of all Jorge Rios. The Burley farmer recalls King focusing his message on hope in the face of discrimination against blacks. It's a message that Rios and 70 other Latinos resurrected Monday - the holiday marking King's birthday - this time asking Idahoans to try to see them as more than just illegals, or alien invaders, or anathema to Idaho life.

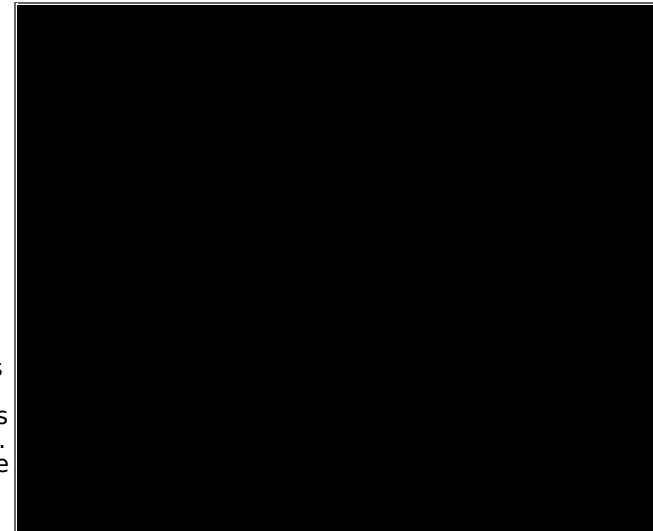
"I want to be part of this great community and support this event for the immigrant people," said Rios, who's lived in Burley for 25 years. Rios said the possibility of equality was "the big message that he (King) started when it was worse. He started making big changes and even gave his life to be equal."

The large crowd gathered in frigid winds on the corner of East 16th Street and Overland Avenue. With power drills in hand, a group deftly installed colorful placards against a pair of cement benches. The patriotic-themed decorative signs, seen around Boise since November, are the first to appear in the Magic Valley.

One says, "Immigration is an American EXPERIENCE. Acceptance is an American VALUE." The other says, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Matthew 25:35."

Called the Welcoming Idaho Initiative, the movement is made up of Christian and human rights groups and will place signs across the Magic Valley over the course of the next few months, said Leo Morales of Idaho Community Action Network. Similar initiatives already exist in about 10 other states, Morales said. Idaho borrowed the idea from a project in Tennessee.

"The Magic Valley has become very polarized, particularly around the issue of immigration," Morales said.



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The Welcoming Idaho Initiative came to Burley with messages about tolerance towards immigr... (January 21) [Play Video](#)



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A recent series of immigration sweeps only acted to highlight fears and perceptions of racism in the Magic Valley. Many Latinos have been seeking a way to communicate positive messages to other Idahoans, rather than allow for the chasm to expand.

"Acceptance is an Idaho value and today we are not living this value," said Kent Thibault, regional director of Catholic Charities of Idaho. "We need to work hard ... to embrace the values that we believe in."

Other speakers, including former Rupert Mayor Audrey Neiwerth, said that as mayor she launched Farm Worker Appreciation Day in August to "let them know how valuable they are to our community and for our economy." She said she flew to Michoacan, Mexico, to understand where immigrants come from and why they feel forced to enter the U.S. illegally. She understands the reasons now, she said, and she will continue to promote understanding "as long as I'm alive."

Morales said disinformation still plagues many Idahoans who misunderstand immigrants.

Morales calls migrant farm workers "economic refugees." He says the bulk of families immigrate to Idaho to build a better life for their families - the same as other Idahoans.

The Rev. Maugricio Medina said what too many experience when they get here are immigration laws that proceed to tear their families apart. He referred in his speech to an illegal immigrant who had run a business in Hailey for 11 years when a cop stopped him recently for a broken tail light. The reverend visited him at the Twin Falls County jail before U.S. Marshals deported him.

"He was really, really sad and I think depressed over it," Medina said.

The man's daughter was born in the U.S. - a naturalized citizen. His wife was also illegal. A few months later, his wife and daughter flew to join the man in Mexico, but the daughter was turned away because she is not a Mexican citizen.

"Only the Native American has the right to be here," Medina said. "And we have treated him as a stranger in his own country. You and I were once strangers in a foreign land."

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ASHLEY SMITH/Times-News  
Two-year-old Birseda Cuevas rests on her mother's shoulder Monday afternoon during a gathering with speakers discussing immigration issues.

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