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**SECTION:** OP-ED; Pg. A19**LENGTH:** 802 words**HEADLINE:** Latino Festival kicked the habit;  
DERRICK Z. JACKSON**BYLINE:** By Derrick Z. Jackson, Globe Staff**BODY:**

Red ink has not sapped Eduardo Perdomo's pride. Perdomo is president of the Latino Festival in Washington, D.C. Last weekend, the 27-year-old festival attracted half a million people. This was the first where it refused sponsorship from alcohol and tobacco companies and banned the sale of beer. "We want to teach our children our roots and where we want to be in the 21st century," Perdomo said on the phone. "Our youngsters are targets for smoking, alcohol, and drugs. We want to tell them that as we go into the 21st century, we want them to be free of alcohol, free of smoke, free of cocaine. We wanted a big vehicle to communicate this message. What we want to communicate is peace, friendship, happiness, and family values."

Most major Latino organizations, like most big African-American groups, take tobacco and alcohol money despite statistics showing that African-American men suffer at high rates from smoking and alcohol-related cancers and that Latino men suffer at high rates from alcohol-related diseases. Latino youths have high rates of smoking and drinking.

Perdomo said the Latino Festival has discussed the issue for three years as more and more critics emphasized the damage done by cigarettes and alcohol. The board was moved to action last year, when several fights sparked by intoxicated gang members forced a shutdown of the festival.

"There were four or five Coors trucks at the festival, with guys leaving their wives and children and herding over to trucks like they were milking a cow," said Elmer Huerta, a physician nationally known among Latinos for his public health commentaries on radio and TV. "It was a shame for me as a Latino.

"Even though we are 21 different countries, alcohol is a common theme in our culture. In the Argentine tango, the Peruvian waltz, and the Mexican rancheras, men sing that because of alcohol they are going to get drunk to forget about the woman. It's a big ritual for a father to give his 15-year-old son a drink and say, 'You're a man now.' Budweiser has a promotion where they say, 'As unique as your Latin spirit.' "

Huerta's outrage and the statistics he accumulated on cirrhosis and crime related to alcohol among Latinos helped the board come to its ban. The decision was costly. Beer sponsorships had ranged from \$ 10,000 to \$ 20,000, and sales of beer usually added another \$ 20,000 to the festival's coffers. With an original budget of \$ 120,000 and fees from vendors bringing in only \$ 80,000, Perdomo was staring at a \$ 40,000 deficit.

The Marlboro Man tried to ride to the festival's rescue. Philip Morris made an offer Perdomo said might have reached \$ 10,000 if he wanted it. He turned it down. He asked other major Latino organizations for financial help, but, beholden as they were to alcohol and tobacco - the National Council of La Raza, the nation's largest Latino civil rights organization, received \$ 175,000 from Philip Morris in 1991 - none of them offered any.

So Perdomo stripped the festival to its bones. Some concerts had to be canceled because the festival could not afford luxury dressing room trailers. The festival had no executive director, no public relations firm, and no hospitality tents.

That cut expenses to \$ 100,000. It still left \$ 20,000 in unpaid bills.

What he did not receive in cash, Perdomo has collected in spirit. He has received many congratulations and small checks from people around the nation. Jane Delgado, president of the National Coalition of Hispanic Health and Human Services Organizations, said the decision is perhaps the most major public rejection of alcohol and tobacco money to date by a Latino organization. This week, the coalition rejected the proposed deal between tobacco companies and the states, saying the pact ignores the intense targeting of Latinos by cigarette companies.

"We really cannot make any more excuses for taking tobacco and alcohol money," Delgado said. Some use the rationalization that "since the tobacco companies make money from us, they should give back," he continued. "But drug dealers make money in our community. We don't ask them to give back."

Perdomo said this year's debt will not make the board waver on its stance. All the deficit has done, he said, is spark more-intense fund-raising for next year. "Banning alcohol and tobacco is a permanent decision for this board," Perdomo said. "If a new board ever reverses it, we'll fight them from the outside. The beer and cigarette companies have brainwashed us for so long we have to stand up and declare that we are not inferior or marginal. For years, they tricked us into making us believe they were doing something good for the community. Now we realize we were just their vehicle for advertising poison to our people. We're not going to be their instrument anymore."

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