

My First Memories of El Dia de Los Muertos Celebration at Self Help

by Linda Vallejo

My first memories of El Dia de Los Muertos begin in 1976 with a request to the National Endowment of the Humanities written by Sister Karen Bocalero and Virginia Torres (aka René Acosta). Karen and Virginia were working frantically to develop this new idea and writing it up to meet the deadline. When you got Virginia and Karen in a room together the ideas would fly!

The studio was “a-buzz” with the possibility of studying El Dia de Los Muertos and its meaning and importance to the Chicano community we served. Sister Karen wanted Dia de Los Muertos to become “part of Chicano culture” with families visiting the gravesites of loved ones, altars dedicated to loved ones and ancestors in community and home celebrations, and a curriculum that the artists of the Barrio Mobile Art Studio (BMAS) could use in teaching children about the history and values of this “celebration of life.” The NEH grant would allow us to find and research materials, and to create a curriculum for our students and the community through an event and art workshops.

The grant was awarded and we began searching for information. It appeared that El Dia de Los Muertos didn't exist anywhere in the US and that very few books, articles or publications about the celebration could be found. The Internet didn't exist back in 1976 so the only way to research was to call and visit libraries. We searched nationwide and I remember we were saddened by the dirge of materials. We consulted with historians and professors specializing in the history of Mexico and found a lot material about Mictlantecuhtli, the Aztec god of death and the underworld, as well as the traditional celebration in Puebla, Mexico.

The celebration in Puebla begins the night before with an all-night vigil “velación” at gravesites cleaned and decorated with gold and yellow marigolds “cempasúchile” and candles to “light the way” of the ancestors, followed by a day-long celebration with carpets of marigolds and papel picado covering the roadways and fireworks to help guide the spirits of the children to join their families once again.

During this time my husband Ron and I traveled a great deal to Mexico and we started collecting books and catalogs on El Dia de Los Muertos. Many of these books were used as study guides for the BMAS curriculum and classes, as well as student and community art workshops.

From these studies and research came the first Dia de Los Muertos celebration at Self Help and Art, Inc. I remember it well. Sister Karen, Sister Beth, Sister Pius, Michael Amescua, Cecilia Castaneda Quintero, and I decorated what was to become Galeria Otra Vez with traditional altars, banana leaves we gathered from the neighborhood, papel picado, photographs of our own family members, and plates of homemade enchiladas, molé, rice and beans.

On the evening of November 2, 1977 we gathered in a circle around an incense burner “pebetero” filled with burning sage and Sister Karen lead us in a prayer to remember our ancestors and give thanks for life. She said, “This burning incense is like my burning heart.” This intimate circle of friends and colleagues then shared a meal of food that we made ourselves. My memory of the room is of the light blue paper used to make the papel picado and the pebetero sitting on the floor as we gathered in prayer and thanksgiving.

During these early years when Self Help was still located at 2111 Brooklyn Ave. the Teatro Campesino joined us. Behind the building was a small parking lot that Sister Karen would rent for the outside celebration. Teatro Campesino really got the community going! They came with their street theater in full Dia de Los Muertos regalia and raised the roof! One year we built a stage in the parking lot for their performance, while the altars and workshops were offered upstairs. The next year they presented an entire play at Roosevelt High School for an auditorium packed crowd.

The Barrio Mobile Art Studio used the lessons learned from our research to create lesson plans for the East Los Angeles elementary school students we served. I remember Sister Karen requiring BMAS teachers to develop lesson plans. Boy! Did she have to nail us down to get that job done! Our studies in the Dia de Los Muertos tradition informed our classes bringing its history and values to the children we taught. We taught them to honor their ancestors and to give thanks for and enjoy life.

These first celebrations included a parade “desfile” led by maestro Florencio Yescas’ Azteca dance troupe all the way down Brooklyn Ave. to Evergreen Cemetery. I remember Sister Karen having a really hard time each year convincing the city to close down the street for the parade. But somehow she always got it done. You can imagine the parade! Danzantes with drums, chachayotes, and rattles leading the way! My danza maestra, Josefina Gallardo, has told me that many of our community’s Azteca danzantes found their way into danza by participating in Self Help’s Dia de Los Muertos in those early days. One year, Leo Limon created a big splash for the parade by decorating a car with a giant image of the Virgen de Guadalupe.

The defile of danzantes, artists, children and families dressed up in “calavera - calaca” would march to Evergreen Cemetery for an indigenous prayer led by Joey Rivera followed by a mass with Father Gino. Joey would dress in a white loin cloth and a headdress “penacho” of blue macaw feathers and solemnly dedicate the celebration to the ancestor gods. Father Gino offered a full mass with altar, Eucharist and wine.

The community came alive with the celebration! BMAS set the stage by teaching classes and inviting the community to participate in the celebration and free family art workshops before the event helped to fully engage the community. Together we silkscreened posters and made

placards with Posada's "La Catrina" for the children to color and painted faces "a la calaca." I personally believe that El Dia de Los Muertos is in our Chicano/Latino DNA and that's why the celebration has spread like wildfire.

My memories are very important to me and I think of Sister Karen and those early days very often. A photograph of Sister Karen sits on my desk and I find myself sharing the challenges of my art career with her and her spirit...remembering our teachers and ancestors has become a part of my daily life.