



I always carry my mother's words with me, and I share them with everyone I teach about Día de Los Muertos. She said,

We all suffer three deaths. The first death is the day that we give up our last breath, the day that we die. Our second death is the day we are buried, never to be seen on the face of the Earth again. But the third, the most horrible, most dreaded death of all, IS TO BE FORGOTTEN.

—Ofelia Esparza

Día de los Muertos Altars: Bridges to Remembrance, Healing, and Community

by Ofelia Esparza

In 1973 Day of the Dead was never observed in the United States like in Mexico and was unheard of among many in my U.S.-born, California-based Chicano community. It was known only as the holy days, November 1 (All Saints' Day) and November 2 (All Souls' Day) in the Catholic Church calendar, certainly not as days of festive color and celebration. It was introduced to the East Los Angeles Community in 1973 by a progressive Catholic nun, Sister Karen Bocalterro, and two Mexican artists, Carlos Bueno and Antonio Ibanez, at [Self Help Graphics & Art](#), a community-based art center in East Los Angeles.

About the photo: The altar *Mictlan Sur* honors Sister Karen Bocalterro (20'x12'x14'), 2000, by Ofelia Esparza, Self Help Graphics & Art, East Los Angeles, CA.

It was a time of great social upheaval throughout the nation. The Chicano community had just experienced a tragic, heavy-handed response from the East Los Angeles sheriffs at a peaceful demonstration against the Vietnam War and long-standing grievances of inequalities in education and representation. The artists wanted to create a project that brought unity, healing, and empowerment to the Chicano community by reclaiming its cultural self-identity and connecting the strong, positive values and cultural assets in place for generations. Bueno and Ibanez recalled Día de Los Muertos in their town in Mexico and how it was rooted in tradition, ceremony, ancestors, altars/ofrendas, and art that engaged the entire community. The Day of the Dead celebration in East L.A. began!



This altar was dedicated to the Rio Hondo College “Dreamer” students and their immigrant families living in fear of deportation and during the height of the family separations at the border detention centers in 2018. This photo was taken before the Rio Hondo students were able to add their own personal mementos and notes to the *Ofrenda Altar for Our Dreamers* (22’x5’x9’), 2018, by Ofelia Esparza and Rosanna Esparza Ahrens, Rio Hondo College. Whittier, CA.

Today, this custom of honoring ancestors that dates back more than 3,000 years to Pre-Columbian early Indigenous Mexico, has transcended time and history. The Spanish who conquered Mexico in 1519 came with the intention of reaping the rich resources of this land, especially gold. They also drove to subjugate the Indigenous people and to eradicate their religion and culture, replacing it with Christianity. The Europeans succeeded in the first two, but only almost succeeded in the latter. While many thousands converted to the new religion, many thousands kept their deep-rooted rituals and observances related to their devout, ancient relationship with nature and the cosmos—

under the guise of Catholicism. Over the expanse of the last 700 years, Catholicism as practiced by a great many in Mexico, became a meld of Christian and Indigenous religious beliefs and practices. This is manifested in the Day of the Dead altars and other practices throughout Mexico.



This two-dimensional altar was constructed entirely of paper with hand-painted watercolor images mounted on a wall. The tissue paper marigold arch is the only three-dimensional part of this installation in the children's section of the Whittier Central library.

Recuerdos Que Nunca Mueren (Remembrances that Never Die) (6'x16'x 5" deep), 2019, by Rosanna Esparza and Ofelia Esparza, Central Library, Whittier, CA.

The Ofrenda

Ofrenda means offering. In Mexico, it refers to a home altar installed to honor the memory of a deceased loved one for Día de Los Muertos. It is composed of several main elements and offerings. Among these are photographs, flowers, food, and a variety of mementos and other chosen artifacts that reflect the life and spirit of the one(s) who are being remembered. Thus, the altar itself is an Ofrenda—a central element in the Day of the Dead tradition.

The Ofrenda is a powerful sacred space because it is not only created with the heart and mind of the altar maker, but it also reflects the heart and soul of the one being honored. Moreover, abstract concepts such as love, spirituality, human struggle, or one's relationship with God or Nature come into play. I regard the Ofrenda as a spiritual bridge to the ancestors that generates a sense of grounding and healing. This practice promotes the traditional arts and the importance of oral narratives that connect one generation to the next, which extend to building community and beyond. Creating an altar bridges the living with the Dead; it bridges generations; it bridges communities and even cultures.

These concepts held within the celebration of Day of the Dead are important more than ever in our present society. Therefore, presenting this celebration to students of all ages and at their level of understanding can promote better understanding of differences and similarities among diverse communities and even develop empathy and unity in the process.

Remembering loved ones or honoring our ancestors is a universal concept that touches everyone, everywhere. Just as there are many ways to build an Ofrenda in Mexico and the U.S. today, many cultures in the world also practice unique ways to remember their dead. Knowing this teaches us that we have a connection to many more people than we think. This is another important lesson for students to learn--starting with one's own family circle, learning about the ancestors—where they came from and what their life might have been—starts to unfold the significance of Día de los Muertos. Even if one thinks there is no information available, one can still imagine and learn about those from one's culture who lived and survived somehow because each of us is living proof of their existence. Of course, seeking information from an eldest living relative or someone else who can provide even the tiniest bit of a story is important.

My early learning about Día de Los Muertos and making Ofrendas came from watching my mother, Guadalupe, who was taught by her grandmother, Mama Pola, who raised her. I represent the sixth generation of altar makers of the grandmothers I can name. My mother created four altars during the year. One was displayed all year and held the photos of our ancestors. I felt intimately connected to my great-great-grandmother even though I never knew her. Through my mother's detailed and repeated stories about her I got to know her well. That is the knowledge about Ofrendas that I carried into my adulthood when I wanted to know and learn more and more.



Created for Self Help Graphics & Arts' annual Noche De Ofrenda (Eventing of the Altar) installation, this altar was dedicated to the City of Los Angeles memorializing the hundreds of loved ones who fell victim to Covid-19. Building this monumental community altar was especially personal for the Esparza family who lost five family members, including Ofelia's elder brother Rudolfo Estrada (95), his wife Lily (94), and Ofelia's sister Evangeline Jaquez (88). Although the installation was in a public space, there was no public event. People from all over the city came to add personal photos and mementos to the ofrenda.

Monument to Our Resilience (24'x15'x16'), 2020, by Ofelia Esparza, Rosanna Esparza Ahrens, assisted by Denise Esparza, Xavier Esparza, Grand Park Civic Center, Los Angeles, CA.

Over the years, the crux of the work I am immersed in with the practice of altar making has been the spiritual and healing aspect in creating an Ofrenda, which I believe is intrinsic to the process of Remembrance and Honoring the Dead. This has become key to my passing on this tradition and knowledge to my nine children. My daughters Rosanna, Denise, Elena, Jacqueline and my sons Xavier, Alec, Ben, and Len are known as altar makers, if not assisting or leading my own work. My mother must be so pleased to see her grandchildren carrying on this tradition. I am elated that even some of my young great-grandchildren have already made a small altar of their own. They are learning to make tissue paper marigolds, something my family has become known for and teaches to others. But most importantly, I want them to know who their grandparents were, to know about our ancestors, where they came from, and hear their stories, just as my mother did for me.

Ofelia Esparza is an artist, altar maker, and educator born in 1932 in East Los Angeles, where she raised nine children and still lives. Her Day of the Dead Ofrendas have been shown nationally and internationally. A great portion of her work honors womanhood and reflects the spirituality found in nature and in the

dignity of the people around her. Ofelia's work celebrates her spirituality and Mexican/Indigenous heritage. Informed by her mother's altar-making traditions, her Ofrendas became integral in her art curriculum at City Terrace Elementary School, where she retired in 1999. Her role as educator extends into her community, where she sees herself as a cultural facilitator. She was conferred an honorary PhD in Humane Letters by her alma mater, California State University, Los Angeles, in 2016. With her daughter, Rosanna Esparza Ahrens, she conducts intergenerational workshops combining art, culture, and social activism as a vehicle toward wellness and personal empowerment throughout the community and at a women's correctional facility. They served as cultural advisors for the 2017 Pixar movie Coco. In 2018, Ofelia was honored as a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment of the Arts.

From the Editors: This National Endowment for the Arts video featuring Ofelia Esparza as a National Heritage Fellow brings her story and deeply significant art to life. Click to learn from Ofelia in her own words about the process and meaning of altar making before you plan your classroom Day of the Dead learning and activities: <https://www.arts.gov/honors/heritage/ofelia-esparza>.

Urls

Self Help Graphics & Art: <https://www.selfhelpgraphics.com>

Classroom Connections

Language Arts and Visual Art

DAY OF THE DEAD AND HALLOWEEN

I find that students and parents LOVE Halloween. Since Day of the Dead starts right after Halloween it is important *not* to mention Day of the Dead during Halloween to avoid confusing or inter-mixing the two celebrations. One way to handle this dilemma that has worked very well with all the elementary grades I have taught is this language and vocabulary activity, which can inspire additional writing and art activities, as well.

I have students call out single words (nouns and adjectives) that describe Halloween as I write them on a large chart sheet (Option: Use colored markers and write the words randomly just to make it interesting). Words: funny, fun, candy, ghosts, witches, scary, monsters, costumes, pumpkins, zombies, cemetery, spider webs, mummy, bloody, masks, trick or treat, jack-o-lanterns, bats, mask, make-up, flashlights, cold, howling, dead, tombstone, claws, etc., etc. Then put the chart away for later use. This is important.

To introduce Day of the Dead, ask students what they know about this important celebration. Do not write this down, just accept all answers and tell them they will be finding out in the following days. Whatever artifacts or visuals you may use to display in somewhat of an altar format can spark their interest and curiosity. Depending on the grade, read or tell a story, discuss an artifact on display, show a film or short video, or share a set of images of altars. Perhaps talk about a personal experience such as making an altar. Discuss if your plan is to have students build an altar in the



I constructed a portable altar for the classroom that I used several years. It was much more helpful to introduce and discuss a traditional home altar with my own ancestors. I still use it for workshops and presentations and have refurbished it and continue to add new artifacts (all handmade by me). Creating my own mini-altar was so much fun that I taught many portable altar workshops for teachers over the years. Now my best students—my daughters—are doing this work.

Para Mis Seres Queridos, Portable Ofrenda (12'X10''X17''), 1992-today, by Ofelia Esparza.

classroom or somewhere on site. Keep this initial presentation simple. Announce any call for materials if they will be needed, depending upon activities. There are many resources and ideas for the classroom, some are provided here.

After all Day of The Dead lessons and activities are done, students will do the word association lesson like they did after Halloween. On a new large chart sheet of paper write students' answers (nouns and adjectives) to "what single words describe Day of the Dead?" Words: fun, family, love, ancestors, sad, candles, Catrina, bread, funny, happy, honor, grandparents, skeletons, skulls, thankful, candy, altar, flowers, puppets, colorful, photographs, food, fruits, hummingbird, tamales, corn, papel picado, face paint, cemetery, butterfly, etc. After discussion, bring in the vocabulary chart they did after Halloween. Display both charts and have students observe and discuss similarities and differences in the vocabulary that describes both celebrations. The goal of these two lessons is, "Día de Los Muertos Is NOT Mexican Halloween!" Here are many opportunities for authoring stories and making art.

FAMILY STORIES

Have students interview a parent, a grandparent, an elder, or any family member who can tell the student about a grandparent or ancestor. The purpose is for the student to learn about an ancestor whom the student can write about. Ideally, there would be a photograph, if available. The ancestor writing/artifact will be added to a Day of the Dead altar or as part of a bulletin board display. The teacher can set guidelines for suggested questions for the student to ask. The parents should be informed about this assignment, and they can decide who will be the person the student will learn about. Since sensibility is important here, the assignment can be quite simple if necessary, such as a brief profile of the person who will be honored. Along with the writing (at least a short paragraph depending on the grade level) the student will make a drawing of the ancestor.



The 2019 Tucson Meet Yourself Folklife Festival collected photos from the public to memorialize their loved ones in this community altar. Over 500 photos and dedications collected were displayed on the TV screen as a looping video. During the three-day event, people brought in more photos, which they mounted and hand-embellished on paper frames, then added to the Ofrenda.

Tucson Meet Yourself Folklife Festival community altar (24"x12"x16"), 2019, by Rosanna Esparza Ahrens and Ofelia Esparza, Tucson, AZ.

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CULMINATING PROJECTS

All the activities, projects, writings, artwork, and oral presentations for Day of the Dead can be presented as a culminating event in a classroom with other classes or grades or in a schoolwide program. Students can act as docents for each classroom. Parents and/or volunteers are vital. Most available parents are happy to help in their children's school events. Just reach out to them. There are always talented people willing to carry out tasks that a teacher will appreciate, such as helping preparing work to be displayed, room decorations, distributing arts and crafts materials, teaching other parents a crafting skill needed in executing a big event, directing the movement of visiting classrooms or coordinating the scheduling for visitors, etc.



Familia Querida, 2012, by Ofelia Esparza and Rosanna Esparza Ahrens, Self Help Graphics & Art, Los Angeles, CA

RESOURCES

There are many more resources in English available to educators today than when I started building public altars and teaching about Day of the Dead more than 40 years ago. Those I still recommend can be found online if they are out of print. A few published later I found to be valuable, although several use excerpts from older publications. Today resources for teachers and books for children abound. Check school and public libraries as well.

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I find that activities for the classroom are repeated in many teaching materials. It takes teachers' innovation to create different versions or extensions of these, but teachers know how to do that. I got many ideas from looking into the wonderful Day of the Dead folk art books or at local Mexican marketplaces. The creativity found in the folk art of many cultures offers a wealth of ideas. I believe that students of all ages should have opportunities to compare and benefit from this kind of experience.

Ofelia Esparza's Suggested Readings

Teaching Resources

Artes De Mexico #62, Día de los Muertos, Ritual Serenity. Artes de Mexico, 2002. Bilingual.

Day of the Dead Crafts: More than 24 Projects that Celebrate Día de Los Muertos. Kerry Arquette, Andrea Zocchi, and Jerry Vigil. Cantata Books, 2008. [A photo of Ofelia's altar is on page 15 under "What is your Ofrenda style?"]

The Day of the Dead, El Día de Los Muertos: A Mexican Celebration Handbook. Ann Stalcup, Four Winds Press, 2013, grades 1-5.

Days of the Dead: Mexico's Festival of Communion with the Departed. John Greenleigh and Rosalind Rosoff Beimler, Pomegranate, 1998. Bilingual.

Indo-Hispanic Folk Art Traditions II. Bobbi Salinas-Norman. Pinata Publications, 1988. Bilingual, excellent activities.

Ofrenda: Altar Makers Create Bridges between Life and Death. Kimi Eisele (author in this JFE issue) spoke to Ofelia and her daughter Rosanna to learn more about the commemorative practice of altar making, <https://borderlore.org/ofrenda-altar-makers-create-bridges-between-life-and-death>.

Skeleton at the Feast: Day of the Dead in Mexico. Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloë Sayer, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Through the Eyes of the Soul: Day of the Dead in Mexico, Mary J. Andrade, La Oferta Publishing, 1999. Bilingual.

Children's Books

Abuela. Arthur Dorros (Author), Elisa Klevin (Illustrator), Puffin Books, 1997, ages 3-9.

Calavera Abecedario: A Day of the Dead Alphabet Book. Jeanette Winter (Author, Illustrator), HMH Books, 2006.

Gift For Abuelita / Un regalo para Abuelita: Celebrating the Day of the Dead/En celebracion del Día de los Muertos. Nancy Luenn (Author), Robert Chapman (Illustrator), 2004, Rising Moon Books Multilingual .

I Remember Abuelita: A Day of the Dead Story. Janice Levy (Author), Loretta Lopez (Illustrator), Miguel Arisa (Translator), Albert Whitman & Company, 2007, ages 4-8. Bilingual.

Pablo Remembers. Gregory Ancona (Author, Illustrator), HarperCollins, 1993, ages 6-9.

The Spirit of Tio Fernando: A Day of the Dead Story. Janice Levy (Author), Morella Fuenmayor (Illustrator), Teresa Mlwar (Translator), Albert Whitman & Company, 1995, ages 4-8. Bilingual.

Uncle Monarch: The Day of the Dead. Judy Goldman (Author), Rene King Moreno (Illustrator), Simon & Shuster, 1974, ages 6-9.