El Día de Los Muertos

Students, teachers and staff are returning to school with untreated social and emotional complications. They are emerging from a year and a half of lockdowns, battles over mask-on or mask-off and the overwhelming loss of loved ones physically gone forever. For many, the loss is still very raw regardless of how long it has been since the death of a
loved one. The Día de Los Muertos, or the Day of the Dead, is a traditional celebration to honor the lives of ancestors.

The Arts and Culture Google page indicates that the Día de Los Muertos is a celebration by the “people in Mexico and Central America and for Mexican Americans in the United States.” In addition, movie director Lee Unkrich captures the essence of the Día de Los Muertos in Coco, a Pixar Animation Studios movie released by Walt Disney Pictures in 2017. Vibrant artistry, deep tradition and an unwavering ceremony are celebrated yearly in preparation for the Nov. 2 Día de Los Muertos Celebration. Getting ready for the Día de Los Muertos begins with the set-up of an altar. Altars for the Día de Los Muertos can be composed of one picture or several pictures of loved ones who have passed. Artistic sugar skulls help decorate the altar along with marigold flowers and lit candles. Perforated paper with decorative designs known as “papel picado” also help enhance the look of the altar.

by Dr. Jeannie Meza-Chavez Superintendent of Schools San Elizario ISD

One can begin to capture the personality of the individual being honored by adding the individual’s favorite music playing in the background and adding the preferred foods and objects of the deceased loved one. Many also add water and “pan de muerto,” known as Day of the Dead Bread. In the San Elizario Independent School District (SEISD), traditional celebrations like the Día de Los Muertos are passed on and kept generationally authentic through the passionate teaching of Mrs. Cynthia Villareal. Through her education, generations of Ann M. Garcia Enriquez Middle School students have learned about the artistry and fanfare of the Día de Los Muertos Celebration. Ms. Villareal has been a Spanish teacher with the SEISD for all 14 years she has served in education. For Villareal, the most challenging part of teaching students about the Día de Los Muertos Celebration is explaining the learning challenges and cultural characteristics. She states, “Día de Los Muertos is a lesson taught with respect.” The celebration ultimately brings families together when students and parents engage in the beautiful aspects of the celebration. Students follow different methods in narrowing down the individual(s) they will honor with an altar for the celebration. For students, “The assignment is to research the person they wish to honor and write a bibliography to share with the class; the hope is for them to get to know the person on a deeper level and to acknowledge their time with us,” states Villareal. In this way, the altar begins to take form because it honors someone who has passed away. Many times, the students admire the person being honored. The culmination of the assignment is the presentation of research findings that become a part of the commemorative altar and celebration. The Día de Los Muertos Celebration in SEISD takes on a different form as the altars are created individually by students or by a team of students. In the first week of the lesson, students learn about the altar and how Spanish-speaking countries celebrate the Día de Los Muertos. In the second week of the study, students apply what they have learned about altars and transfer that knowledge to the altar they begin to construct. Ms. Villareal engages many individuals through this celebration. She has students present their altars with individual judges scoring a set criterion as they submit their respective altar information.

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The culmination of the Día de Los Muertos Celebration extends to involve parents. Many parents engage by assisting with decorations, the construction of the altar, the creation of flowers and the preparation of authentic Mexican food to be placed on the altars. Some favorite foods are mole, a sauce made of dried chile and spices layered or mixed into the chicken. The chile Colorado (“chile colored red”) is chopped-up pieces of beef with red chile. A favorite is enchiladas, which are rolled corn tortillas stuffed with cheese dipped in red chili sauce. Flautas are also a regular favorite because they are tightly rolled corn tortillas stuffed with meat. Tacos, corn tortillas folded in half and filled with different ingredients such as potatoes or beef, are also popular. Such a celebration enables the overwhelming loss of a loved one to be remembered and honored. Villareal states, “During these difficult times, I believe it’s most needed.” The Día de Los Muertos Celebration is necessary when the magnitude of the loss from the last year and a half is taking a toll. To honor and celebrate the life of a loved one is a heritage lesson that serves to nurture the resilient students we want to succeed in life.
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