

Gallup library helps Gallupians to honor departed souls

Written by By Rachel Pfeiffer and Rick Abasta Sun Correspondents
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WITH FIFTH ANNUAL sugar skulls decorating party

As Día de los Muertos was being celebrated Nov. 1 and 2, many engaged in the cultural tradition of decorating sugar skulls. The centuries-old holiday custom presents an opportunity for people, primarily those of Mexican heritage, to honor their relatives and loved ones who have died.

The Octavia Fellin Public Library hosted its fifth sugar skulls decorating party at the Rio West Mall Oct. 30. Joshua Whitman, the Experiential Learning Coordinator for the library, explained the library holds events to celebrate the cultural heritages of minority groups, so an event celebrating Día de los Muertos was a natural fit.

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“It’s always best to represent those in the minority groups that are located here,” Whitman said. “That’s where sugar skulls come in. Because [Día de los Muertos] has a deeply-rooted heritage in the Hispanic community, it’s nice to celebrate.”

New to this year’s skull decorating event was the do-it-yourself supply kit for kids to enjoy at home.

“We did the supply kit earlier in the month. People picked up their kits, which included a short instructional video,” Martin said.

The kits included one sugar skull, royal sugar icing, an instructional video, and candied design pieces.

Betty Martin, deputy director for the library, said kids and families enjoyed decorating candy skulls with colored frosting, candy pieces, feathers, leaves, snowflakes, flowers, shells, and other imaginative design pieces.

“We started [sugar skull decorating parties] at the library about five years ago with the Spanish Club at Miyamura High School,” she said.

In addition, an altar decorating contest was held at the library, also in observation of the Day of the Dead. Martin says the altar will be up through Veterans Day.

Christian Spencer of Yatahey, said he was scouting out the sugar skull decorating party with plans to bring his younger cousins to the event.

“I was going to decorate the top part of my skull green and the bottom part in blue. It’s a process,” he said.

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Another family also experimented with color schemes for their Day of the Dead skull designs.

Yvette Dubois, Aiden Gray, Hailey Debois, and Andrea Spencer designed their sugar skulls with spider webs, flowers, gold buttons, and colored frosting.

Dubois said she saw the signs for the event at Camille's and said she made sure that her kids participated.

"I'm trying to make mine like a boy and Hailey is designing hers to be a girl," she said.

Grandmother Andrea Spencer said the kids would not be trick-or-treating this year due to COVID-19 concerns. Instead, the family planned to host a Halloween party with food, candy, and games.

"We invited family to our home to do games and good stuff," Spencer said. "We don't want them to go out there."

In addition to some displays and information about the holiday at the library itself, the staff at the library wanted to get back to hosting an in-person celebration for the community. Because of the pandemic, Whitman said the library felt holding a small event where people could be socially distanced was the most responsible way to celebrate this year.

The library purchased pre-made sugar skulls and set up at the mall where people in the community could come to decorate them.

While one aim of the day was to provide a party for everyone to enjoy, there was a deeper goal for the day, as well.

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“Coming from an indigenous background, the way we honor our dead is going to be slightly different, so it’s good to learn about other cultures and how they honor and celebrate their dead,” Whitman said. “There are a lot of different and diverse ways individuals celebrate.”

“Overall, we try our best to culturally engage individuals to think about other cultures and how they celebrate and to try to gain perspective on how they go about living their cultural practices.”

This deeper goal illuminates the way the library encourages people to engage with traditions different than their own, striving to help build a unified and understanding community.

Sugar skulls are made of sugar mixed with meringue powder, molded into the shape of a skull and decorated with icing, sprinkles, and feathers. In some cases the skulls, or Calaveras, include the name of the departed soul being honored on the forehead. These colorful skulls are used to honor the return of a particular spirit, often by placing them on the home ofrenda or altar, or on the gravestones of departed loved ones.

Sugar art can be traced back to the arrival of Spanish missionaries in the 17th century. While Día de los Muertos had been celebrated long before the arrival of Europeans, sugar skulls specifically began appearing around the 18th Century. Sugar was a material most Mexicans could easily access, so it was a clear choice for making religious festival decorations. Since then, sugar skulls have become an important symbol and tradition for Día de los Muertos.

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