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Preserving holiday tradition

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SUMMARY: El Dia de los Muertos celebration helps unite those with ties to Mexico

They remembered their towns and villages strewn across Mexico. They told of traditions, so difficult to sustain in America, as their children sat rapt in a circle around a colorful altar. A young woman struck a tambour, singing about the dead, about wanting to be buried in the same custom as her ancestors.

Almost a hundred Latino men, women and children celebrated El Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, last Friday, crammed into a community room at Rockwood Landing, an apartment complex in Gresham. They arrived in the night, soaked by the incessant rain, from a cluster of nearby housing complexes in one of Rockwood's poorest stretches, to re-create a faraway tradition in the midst of their new community.

"Sometimes it's easier to speak in English than in Spanish," Alicia Lopez, a community health worker with Latino Network, told children at the celebration. "Sometimes it's difficult to remember our customs. But we should not be ashamed of them, we should not be ashamed of our language and of where we came from."

Rockwood Landing and its adjoining Riviera Garden are home to first-generation Mexican farmworker families, whose members work long hours making ends meet, often earning less than minimum wage. Many of the men and women are not related to each other and come from different regions in Mexico, so they tend to be isolated from each other. They struggle with crime that's rampant here and are afraid to venture out at night.

But reconnecting with the deceased and with those alive, with relations both near and far, provided a rare opportunity to get together. Lopez, 32, started organizing the annual event four years ago.

El Dia de los Muertos traces back thousands of years to the time of the Aztecs, though it is now a part of the Catholic calendar. So the women came to Rockwood Landing and made papel picado, perforated, colored tissue-paper banners, which hang from altars and graves in Mexico during El Dia de los Muertos. Their children, many of them part of the Pumas team of the Santos soccer club, helped dress a communal altar with handmade paper flowers, fruit, bread, figures of the Virgin Mary and photos of the deceased. They gathered close as adults told stories of how the dead were honored in the Mexican states of Nayarit, Guanajuato, Oaxaca and Michoacan.

"I was looking for a way to create connection and trust with the people," Lopez said. "They wanted to celebrate like in their villages. They wanted to share the traditions with their kids, so they are not forgotten."

As Celia Martinez, 31, stirred a caldron of hot chocolate for the guests in the tiny community kitchen, she remembered her native village of Cocucho, in the Mexican state of Michoacan. Martinez came to the United States eight years ago, following her husband, who works in Oregon installing windows. The family lives with four children in a small Riviera Garden apartment.

In Cocucho, the entire village celebrated as one on El Dia de los Muertos, a holiday that falls on the first two days in November, Martinez said. Starting at 4 in the morning on the first day, villagers trekked to the village cemetery, bringing ofrendas, or offerings, of sweets, burritos, pumpkins and tender corncocks. They built an altar, Martinez said, so that the spirits of their loved ones could float back to Earth and reunite with the living. The first day was dedicated to children who died young, the little angels or angelitos. Martinez honored the spirit of her sister, who died as a little girl, she said.

On the second day villagers again went to the cemetery, bringing food for the adult deceased, such as chile and pork

tamales, cookies, bananas and apples. They tried to cook the dead's favorite foods. They also brought flores de zempazuchitl, or golden marigolds, also known as the flowers of death. A Mass was celebrated by a priest, Martinez recalled, and afterward the families took their food --"because the dead ate some already" --and every family held its own feast at home.

These days, the celebrations in Cocucho, an indigenous village of Tarazco Indians, are probably smaller, because "the majority of Cocucho is here in the United States," Martinez said. The village was poor, and many of its inhabitants now work in Oregon fields and restaurants and send money back home.

"We miss our families so much, but we had to come here to survive," said Martinez, as she plunked chunks of Mexican chocolate into boiling milk. She said the Day of the Dead celebration at Rockwood Landing helped her recapture the fellowship of her village ceremony. Before, she used to make a makeshift altar alone at home.

"This celebration is important to me," she said. "It's a little different than in my village, but a lot of people come and together we can celebrate the memory of the deceased. We can remember our families back in Mexico."

Martinez, who picks blackberries and blueberries at a Boring nursery during the picking season, said she and her husband don't have enough money to visit their loved ones in her country of birth. They barely have enough money to pay rent. This is one of the reasons why the family can't move from their Riviera Gardens apartment, where, they say, the carpet is rotting, mold is taking over bedroom walls, the roof leaks and drug dealers make a racket all night long, Martinez said. The complex is considered one of the most crime-ridden by Gresham Police and social service agencies.

She chatted with other women from Cocucho, who crowded in the kitchen, wearing large, elegant earrings and high heels, cradling children wrapped to their bodies with traditional blue shawls. They watched as Lopez, the organizer, lightly tapped a tambour.

"Yo quiero que a mi me entierren, como a mis antepasados, en el vientre oscuro y fresco, de una vasija de barro," she sang. "I want to be buried like my ancestors, in the dark, cool womb of a clay pot." The room grew silent, full of the repeating rhythm.

"Here we are far away from our customs and our tombs," said Lopez as she finished the song. "And maybe this is what drives us to celebrate more. We can't go to the cemetery, but this is our way to remember."

A priest slipped in from the rain, put on a white robe, and took out a bottle of wine and a large wafer from a small suitcase. The Rev. Carlos Nunez of Holy Cross Santa Cruz Episcopal Church in Boring celebrated Mass in the name of all the saints and "the beloved beings who are now with God."

Then music blasted from a CD player, and the room buzzed. A troupe of dancers --two girl dressed in handmade shirts and skirts, and a dozen men and two little boys in masks and embroidered pants and shirts, with strangely twisted wooden canes --burst into the middle of the community room with a harmonious din. They performed "El Baile de los Viejitos (The Little Old Men's Dance)," a 500-year-old tradition depicting and honoring old age, performed during Christmas and El Dia de los Muertos in Michoacan.

Martinez's daughter Maria, 14, was one of the women dancers, who charmingly enticed the masked "old men," clad in colorful hats, loudly stomping in sandals with heavy cherrywood heels and bunches of small bells, never missing a beat.

The dance group, called The Holy Child, or Santo Nino, is one of several groups that dance the indigenous Viejitos dances and compete against each other in the Portland area.

As the dancers filed out and the music stopped, women passed out pan de muertos, bread of the dead, and hot chocolate. They crowded around in bunches, chatting and eating. Their children played nearby, clutching little sugar skulls made earlier that night.

The men lingered at the entrance, watching the rain.

"Teaching this dance to our children is a way of preserving our culture," Jesus Ascencio Rodriguez, who lives with his family in Rockwood Landing and leads one of the dance troupes, told Lopez. "People sometimes make fun of our traditions. But if our children learn when they are little, they will not be ashamed of who they are."

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