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'A different way to look at death': Kentucky Folklife hosts public altar

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Featured artist Bella Diaz of El Paso, Texas, helps set up the interactive p communities of Bowling Green by the Kentucky Folklife Program and th Pioneer Log Cabin on Friday.

Photos by Grace Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com

Members of the Kentucky Folklife Program keep the dead alive in an old cabin on Western Kentucky University's campus.

The organization last week opened its first public ofrenda, a traditional altar from Mexico honoring lost loved ones with gifts and decorations.

The altar at WKU's Pioneer Log Cabin will have visiting hours every Friday from 3 to 5 p.m. and a special event on Halloween Day, offering craft activities, snacks and a chance to leave items for display.

"It provides a different way to look at death, grieving, and loss," graduate student Ciara Bernal said. "It's a way that your family and their community can share that and be reminded that (death) is something that we all deal with and that we all have to face, but it's not as scary as we tend to think."

Ofrendas date back to Aztec tradition and are set up in preparation for Día de los Muertos – "The Day of the Dead" – usually celebrated in the final days of October or the first days of November.

Food, drinks, trinkets, flowers and more adorn a brightly colored table with photos of grandparents, pets, professors and Mexican-American entertainer Selena Quintanilla-Pérez, among others.

Camille Acosta attended WKU for several years and began as KFL's Folklife Specialist in April. As a Chicana woman hailing from Texas, she said the altar was a chance to remedy some homesickness.

"I always missed home a lot, and Día de los Muertos was always a time that kind of brought home to me in those few days that we get to do it," Acosta said. "So upon working here, I met Ciara, and she's also Chicana. We found out that we also have family from El Paso together, so we were trying to brainstorm something that could do that for the community here in Bowling Green."

The altar, photos and gifts act as guides for the souls of the deceased. Acosta explained the tradition is said to allow the dead to visit home and family for a time, dating back to the practices of indigenous people in Central America.

They're usually decorated with Calaveras – brightly painted skulls often made of sugar – and marigolds which are said to guide spirits with their fragrance.

Bernal, who comes from Arizona, said the holiday is widely celebrated in the southwest United States where many Mexican-American families reside. Celebrations become harder to find as one travels north.

"It's pretty well known there but I don't know how many people know about it here," Bernal said. "So it'll be exciting to find out and to bring it here."

Sydney Varajon, a WKU folklife instructor, stopped by to drop off a few items of her own: photos of her grandparents and uncle, a shaker of black pepper for her grandfather, a sprig of flowers she picked on the way.

She said collecting the items had her emotionally “wrecked” all day, but in a good way.

“I was just so excited to do this because it’s a great opportunity to connect cross-culturally and across campus,” Varajon said. “It’s a very, very special event and a special thing to be a part of.”

– *Questions about the ofrenda and upcoming events can be sent to camille.acosta@wku.edu.*

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