

AGGIELIFE

THE BATTALION

Page 3A • Thursday, October 30, 2003

FEAR FACTOR: DAY OF THE DEAD

By Diane Smith
KRT CAMPUS

FORT WORTH, Texas — A grinning family plays on a sandy beach as a cruise ship drifts by. But what appears to be a typical scene from a Caribbean getaway is not: These figurines have skulls instead of faces.

Nearby, bakers make tortillas and a figurine of a skeleton pistolero, or gunslinger, stands guard. Like the beachgoers, they have grinning skulls for heads.

The images fill the shelves of La Mariposa gift shop in Dallas with the eerie mix of death and ceremony that marks the Day of the Dead.

Many Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans celebrate the holiday Nov. 1 and 2 with altars honoring deceased loved ones. The tradition is crossing cultural lines, fueled largely by a growing Hispanic population that is leaving its imprint on American society.

Hispanics are not the only customers buying brightly colored specialty artwork on the internet or at import stores. Teachers are bringing the tradition into classrooms as social studies, writing or art lessons.

"In America, everybody celebrates everybody's holidays. We can be Irish for a day or celebrate Cinco de Mayo," said Roberto Trevino, historian and assistant director of the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at Arlington.

The Day of the Dead is primarily associated with customs practiced in southern Mexico that date back centuries to Mesoamerican cultures that existed there before Spanish rule.

Other Latin American countries, such as Peru, have similar festivities and artwork. Through the years, those traditions merged with the Catholic commemoration of All Saints Day and All Souls Day on Nov. 1 and Nov. 2, respectively.

These two days are when Day of the Dead

activities take place.

"In Mexican culture, there is an attitude toward death that it is something to be accepted," Trevino said. "It's a tradition to make fun of death."

In the Mexican cities of Oaxaca, San Cristobal de las Casas and Patzcuaro, the traditions are spectacular for their beauty and eeriness, experts say. In Patzcuaro, souls are helped across a lake in boats filled with white flowers and candles.

Family and friends in the United States and Mexico build altars in their homes to honor the life of someone who has died. The altars are often adorned with portraits, religious icons and colorful decorations. Often, the person's favorite foods are included.

Shopkeepers at area Mexican import stores said interest in the Day of the Dead has slowly increased in the past decade.

"A lot of people that buy it are surprised by how strange it is," said Michael Garza, manager of the Plaza del Sol shop in Fort Worth. "A lot of people buy it because they are trying to get back into their culture."

Many non-Hispanics become smitten with Day of the Dead folk art while visiting Mexico as tourists.

The artwork turns up more and more in import stores and in movies such as "Frida." Singer Lucinda Williams' album "Essence" has a female skeleton on the back cover.

"It's huge. It's crossing cultures," said Candy Hearne, a manager at La Mariposa. "It's another excuse to celebrate."

At La Mariposa, fancy skeleton ladies called "Katrinas" are lined up along shelves near Mexican Nativity sets. The store stocks sugar skulls and papel picado — festive paper with Day of the Dead images cut into it.

Dallas native Kelly Howell recently surveyed pieces at La Mariposa while shopping for a birthday present. Her friend's birthday had a



JEFFERY WASHINGTON • KRT CAMPUS

The La Mariposa gift shop in Dallas offers items for the Day of the Dead. Celebrating the Mexican holiday is becoming a growing occurrence among Hispanics. The holiday honors the memory of deceased loved ones.

Day of the Dead theme, and she planned to sign her gift, "Happy Birthday, Ghoulfriend."

"I like it. I think it's fun," she said. Malaise Lindenfeld, owner of Miami-based Inkubus.com, said she has carried Day of the Dead novelties for several years, including molds and meringue used to make sugar skulls. In recent months, the demand has exploded.

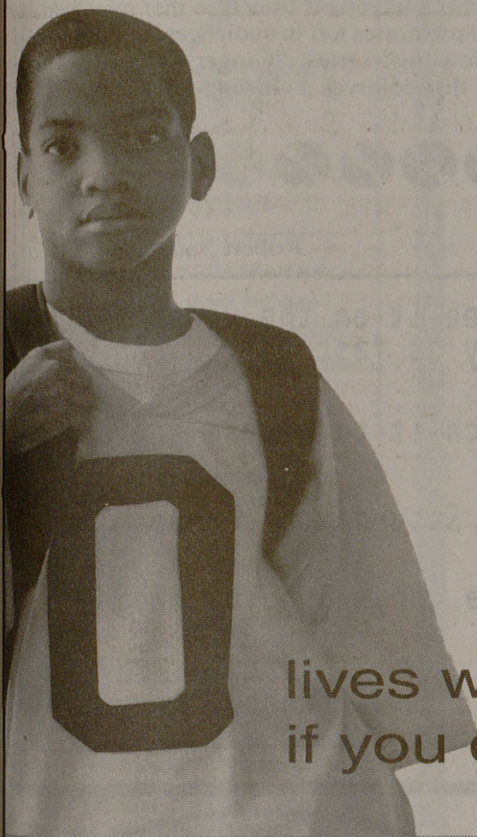
"I have gotten orders from Japan, Canada and

all over the states," she said.

Much of the interest comes because the holiday takes place near Halloween.

But unlike the scariness associated with Halloween, the Day of the Dead is for recognition and acceptance of death as a natural part of life, experts and aficionados say.

"It's such a nice deal," said Ray Grawunder, owner of La Mariposa. "It honors ancestors."



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