

Revisiting Santa Ana's Noche de Altares

It's all about community

By **Kat Avila** | Published on LatinoLA: November 7, 2011



I hadn't visited Santa Ana's *Noche de Altares* (Night of Altars) since 2008, so it was a homecoming to be there on Saturday, November 5. But I took the long way to get there. Dropped off at the Santa Ana public library, I browsed my way past AMVETS Walk of Honor to where the Occupy Santa Ana protesters sat.

In the shadow of a mounted A-4 Skyhawk jet, I spoke to an unemployed white man at their modest camp. He survived by doing odd jobs and was able to eat because of church groups that visited the plaza to feed the homeless. I had passed by some charitable Asians giving out food; one man was singing what could have been hymns.

Afterward I crossed over to the old Orange County Courthouse and shook its locked doors. Since I wasn't getting inside to see the museum, at least I got photos of the red sandstone building. The background sky was a deeper, brighter blue because of the rain the day before.

Fourth Street and Birch was where the Noche de Altares festival had moved. It used to be in front of the historic Yost Theater. One of the festival's sponsors, Calacas (<http://calacasinc.com>), has a store on Fourth Street. Centro Cultural de Mexico, the other sponsor, is nearby on Third Street.

Cal State Fullerton's altar was the first one I lingered at. Jennifer and Alma told me how they made and decorated their sugar skulls. We were joined by Damian. I left with some promotional cards for CSUF's Dia de Los Muertos celebration on Wednesday, November 9, 11:00 a.m. at the Humanities Quad.

Next I admired a customized foot-high skull that held orange and yellow marigolds. It was at the DeColores Queer O.C.'s altar (facebook.com/decoloresoc). Javier said they participate in conferences and visibility events, such as vigils for hate crime victims. We talked about the importance of *la familia* in Latino culture and how this affects Latinos coming out of the closet. For this reason, much of the group's work is with families.

At the O.C. Equality Coalition altar, everyone was taking advantage of the photo ops. The creators of the towering calaveras were married-in-California couple Roman Beltran and Agustin Gonzalez. The female calaveras wore colorful party dresses with head garlands and veils. Their male escorts were simply skeletal.

From the coalition's brochure, I learned there are still states that have no hate crime laws. Many states, especially in the Northern Mountain and Southeastern regions, do not include sexual orientation and gender identity among the protected categories.

Heading toward the festival stage, I saw political cartoonist Lalo Alcaraz busy at his booth. Only last week, LatinoLA.com posted Dr. Al Carlos Hernandez's interview with this prolific and multitalented artist.

Adrian and Bupendra at the Orange County DREAM Team altar (www.isstillhaveadream.org)

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filled me in on the big picture. I repeated some of the objections I had heard to California's DREAM Act. One common complaint is why give college financial aid to the grown children of the undocumented if they can't get jobs after they graduate.

The team said work permits would be the next step. But right now they had to focus on getting through school. Their altar included school diplomas. A poster showed three graduates with mortarboards and gowns running with rolled diplomas in their hands. The image was a takeoff on the highway warning sign that alerts motorists to people dashing across the road.

A trio of small dogs wearing doggy clothes with a decorated-skull pattern padded by. One of the leashed dogs leapt on me, and I paused to pet it. Then I visited an extraordinary collection of string puppet calaveras. "*Viene La Muerte Bailando*" was created by Grupo Chaneque ([facebook.com/grupo.chaneque](https://www.facebook.com/grupo.chaneque)). Each puppet was on sale for \$400-\$500.

The photo op in front of Calacas read: "LIFE IS FRAGILE - LOVE IT - OR LEAVE IT." A huge, veiled ghost-on-a-stick paraded by. Beside me was a tent with a photo portrait wall of Mexican Americans who had received the Congressional Medal of Honor for their bravery. The tribute was created by the O.C. Mexican American Historical Society (OCMAHS).

Santa Ana Valley High School's altar honored slain print journalists. A PEN International handout (www.internationalpen.org.uk) remembered the courageous Mexican print journalists and writers who paid with their lives for speaking out against injustices and organized crime.

Got Youth in Mind (www.yimcal.org)? At their altar, Brialanis said their group helps young people who suffer from ADHD, schizophrenia, depression, and related illnesses. They have bilingual staffers, including herself. As their website proclaims with hope, "There are no bad or unhealable youth."

Finally I joined the community circle dance at the end of the Aztec dancers' blessing. A tall Latina in a lovely embroidered peasant dress took my left hand and a short elderly Latina took my right. The younger woman said the dance would get faster as she pulled me along.

I did my best to hang onto grandma's hand. At the end, grandma said it was good exercise. Feeling a little winded, I heartily agreed. Gotta respect the Aztec dancers for being able to dance for a full hour, then to do the circle dance.

With the growing dark, I headed for the bus stop for a bus that didn't show up at the scheduled time. So I walked, and walked some more. I ended up at a nondescript hamburger joint where a stern-looking cashier said she could give me two tacos and a drink for \$5, which is all I had.

The shredded beef tacos were warm, and hunger made them especially delicious. I got out my notebook and reviewed my day, thinking that it had been very educational.

A writer who likes to bum around the Southland hoping to hear a good story.

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