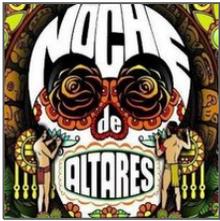


Attending *Noche de Altares* in Santa Ana

A reminder to take a sugar skull break to remember loved ones and to honor the past

By **Kat Avila, Contributing Writer** | Published on LatinoLA: November 6, 2012



I was a nickel short after I counted my change. It costs four dollars for an all-day bus pass. Perhaps I wasn't going to Santa Ana after all, but in a shakedown of my daypack I found a dime. Oh, happy days!

The 10th annual Noche de Altares (Night of Altars) was on Saturday, November 3, in downtown Santa Ana at 4th and Birch with lots of ethnic food and fiesta wares. But I was flat broke as I explained to Yuli at the El

Centro Cultural de Mexico booth who had asked for a donation. She insisted on giving me a postcard calendar anyway and said she would send good vibes my way.

On a closed-off street of calaveras and marigolds, **I followed the Aztec dancers as they blessed the altars.** Ghostly streams of copal incense trailed around them in the air. Then, during their dance performance, I joined the circle of spectators snapping pictures and enjoying the native beat of drums and prayerful feet-stomping. Examining my photos later, I was surprised to find a noontime shot with rays of sunlight fixed on the central figure of *La Muerte* like a spotlight.

At the end of the block, adjacent to Sasser Park, I spotted Roman Beltran and Agustin Gonzalez's newest family of *calavera* giants. The marvelous white-gowned figures wore floral heart-shaped hats with color-coordinated cape-like bridal veils. There were also smaller dress-frame *calaveras* with photo portraits cradled within skirt cages.

Beltran and Gonzalez are also noteworthy as a couple who were able to marry in the narrow window when same-sex marriages were permitted in California. They are founding members of the Orange County Equality Coalition that promotes marriage equality.

An altar with oil paintings turned out to be a memorial to artist Sergio O'Cadiz. Sergio's daughters Pilar and Susana were putting the finishing touches on the altar. Only last month, O.C. Weekly featured Gustavo Arellano's interview with Pilar. I remember from the interview Sergio's poignant response to the destruction of his Colonia Juarez wall mural by Fountain Valley city officials, "In my culture, there is the tradition of oral history. That's what I will retreat into."

A multicultural entry was a booth of white paper lanterns by the Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association (VAALA). Julie, an intern, asked if I wanted to write a memorial note to attach to one of the lanterns. I passed in my curiosity to find out how the lanterns were made. There were multiple ink prints of loved ones on the lanterns. The impressions were transferred from photocopies using acetone, she said. By the way, the color white is associated with death and mourning, not weddings, in East Asian cultures.

At the Latino Health Access booth, community health worker Shahab wanted to make sure I knew that despite the organization's name they would help anyone who needed assistance regardless of racial or cultural origin. He told me the health education clearinghouse was not a free clinic, but could point people in the right direction if they needed medical services.

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Attending Noche de Altares this year was a good way to catch up on the neighborhood gossip, who's who in the community, and numerous pressing issues such as immigration, the DREAM Act, homelessness, book censorship, domestic violence, and diabetes and cancer. But most important, it was a reminder to take a sugar skull break to remember loved ones and to honor the past.

1. Noche de Altares - www.nochedealtares.org
2. El Centro Cultural de Mexico - www.el-centro.org
3. Latino Health Access - www.LatinoHealthAccess.net
4. Orange County Equality Coalition (OCEC) - <http://ocequality.com/>
5. Sergio O'Cadiz, link to O.C. Weekly article - <http://www.ocweekly.com/2012-10-04/culture/sergio-ocadiz-mural-maria-del-pilar/>

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