

Sounds of pan flute whistles, rustles of tissue flowers and children's laughter filled the great hall of the LBJ Presidential Library on Sept. 22, as hundreds of visitors celebrated Hispanic Heritage month for Austin Museum Day.

Austin Museum Partnership is a non-profit organization that plans free events at museums all around Austin, Texas, on the third Sunday of September every year. One of the participating museums, the LBJ Presidential Library, decided, for the first time, to celebrate Hispanic Heritage month with free arts and crafts, frozen treats and a live Latin band. President Lyndon Baines Johnson originally started Hispanic Heritage Week, beginning on September 15. Twenty years later, President Ronald Regan expanded the dedication to a full 30 days until October 15.

Sheila Mehta is the education specialist at the library and worked with the partnership to set up the event.

"This year we decided on Hispanic Heritage Month, since President Johnson was the first to actually sign it into law," Mehta said. "So why wouldn't we just take the opportunity to celebrate something that means so much to our community, so much to us but also something exceptionally important to the President?"

Mehta said she was inspired to celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month by essays written by high school students from Weslaco, Texas, about the history of Hispanic Heritage month.

Mehta was impressed by the essays and as a former high school educator, she thought of ways to honor their work. "And immediately I was like, 'Why don't we do [a Hispanic heritage celebration] here? Why don't we have an awesome museum day?'"

Mehta pitched her idea to the partnership, and they quickly jumped on board.

Mehta said that despite the library being in Austin, Texas, they do not get a lot of local visitors. Mehta said she wants locals to feel part of their community. "We want them to see themselves in our exhibit, to let them know that they are treasured and we want to be a valued part of their community," Mehta said.

Once the event was greenlit, Mehta said she started to think about what activities would be fun and educational for children while also being respectful to Hispanic culture. Some of the crafts at the event included pan flutes, tissue flowers, mariachi coloring pages and papel picado, commonly found in Mexican culture.

"We don't think about what [papel picado] means, why it's there and honestly, how challenging it is to make," Mehta said. "That's probably the most humbling thing I've done for this whole day, I am not good at it! I will hone my skills one day."

Library volunteer Sharon Ciccarelli, who taught visitors how to make the papel picado, said the event was a fun way to interact with the community and meet new people.

Ciccarelli, who worked as a teacher for 30 years, said the event was a good way for her to learn more about the history of the month while teaching children about the month.

“On a normal day, we don't have crafts out, so it's just a way to interact with kids and get them interested in museums and also celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month,” Ciccarelli said.

The arts and crafts were geared toward children. Melissa Dobies brought her 18-month-old son, Brody, to the event to get him involved in museums and get him out of the heat. Dobies said it was nice for her son to celebrate alongside other children.

Dobies' family is from Mexico and Dobies said celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month is especially important because her son does not look Hispanic. “[It's important] that we teach Brody all about history and his culture at a young age because it's important for him to know where he came from,” Dobies said.