

Latino Film Festival closes with stories of Colombian history, reinforcing Latin identity

One hundred gleaming eyes fixated on the movie screen in front of them, momentarily interrupted by children running across the screen dressed in traditional *pollera colorada*. The smell of *ajiaco*, a chicken and potato Colombian soup, creeping through the air, enveloped the audience in warm memories and rich culture.

“Being here has showed me more and more the necessity for the community to come together in these moments,” said Sarah Rincon, a 26-year-old Colombian American and a first-time attendee of the festival, “to be able to feel reflected in the stories we are seeing in these films, but more than that, feeling reflected in the people we are sitting next to.”

Sunday night at Smathers Library East at the University of Florida, the Latina Women’s League closed off their 21st Annual Latino Film Festival. For the past month, the League hosted events from dance performances to bingo nights and, of course, films. Each film chosen is from a different Latin American country representing that country’s history, struggles and triumphs. The festival serves as more than a gathering to watch movies, it highlights untold stories and connects the Latino audience with their own culture.

Last night’s movie, “Dear Gentleman,” centered around the struggle for Colombian women’s fight for the right to vote. The showing was followed by an interview with the actresses from the film speaking about the challenges and significance of portraying important historical female figures, especially women from their own cultural history.

Rincon said she did not know the story of Colombian women’s struggle in fighting for the right to vote, despite studying in Colombia for many years. “I thought it was very spectacular to be able to see that in person.”

She said she has found it difficult to find community, but she felt that support in last night's event, being able to see her history represented in film.

"It's very important to see culture and diversity," she said.

Rincon said that being surrounded by people like her made her feel loved and seen; it made her realize she could depend on her community.

For Isabella Villa Urrego, a 21-year-old political science senior and Miami native from Colombian parents, said she felt like she found a home away from home.

"Being able to sit there and just have things that I know about my identity and background not need to be explained, it's just automatically understood...was great," said Villa Urrego.

She said she and a friend were excited to see the festival was serving *ajiaco*. "We never thought this would be something we can get in Gainesville."

Villa Urrego said she felt a sense of community because the event was catered to her culture. She said she feels like nuances between countries and identities are lost when grouped under umbrella terms like "Latino" or "Hispanic."

"When we're seen for our own ethnic identity," said Villa Urrego, "I feel like that's where it's definitely a learning experience for everyone, and I think it's beautiful."

The League's President, Erikha Gheri, said the vision for the festival is to encourage cultural exchange.

She wants to show that her organization cares about the community and wants to add to the greater Gainesville community. She said she wants to demonstrate "everything that is happening in Latin culture; to talk about it; that it should be respected and admired."

Furthermore, Gheri said it's meant to make people rethink what it means to be a woman and Latina.

"We can protect each other together," she said.

Gheri also said she gets people coming up to her after the films all the time relating to the subjects and topics shown in the movies. Gheri said audience members tell her it reminds them of their past or their parents' past.

"They will find a piece of their home in this place," said Gheri, "they will be able to see their parents or their grandparents through these films."

The film festival theme this year was "Enriching Cultures, Empowering Communities." It is focused on the celebration of migration as a signal of strength within the Latino community, emphasizing resilience, opportunity and hope to build a new life.

Gheri said the theme was very purposeful.

She said the festival attracted a lot of people up until 2016, but when the political climate changed, Gheri said many people were fearful of attending Latino events where they could be targeted.

In addition, during the pandemic, the festival was forced to continue online where the League lost the rest of its audience.

Just like every year, this year's theme was chosen as a response to the social climate. Gheri said, there have been many things directly affecting the Hispanic community, so it's important to show the richness of Latin culture.

This theme was chosen at a time when immigration policy reflects some of those fears.

A [press release](#) from the Department of Homeland Security published Sept. 23, announced the Trump Administration has ousted more than 2 million people from the U.S. in less than 250 days.

In addition, the majority of arrests, detentions, and removals in 2025 are individuals from Latin American countries, according to [ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations Statistics](#).
“We need to lift the esteem of the Latin people to show how rich the culture is,” Gheresi said.