

## The Walk of Calaveras

Walking with colorful signs, decorated with flowers and twinkling lights to brighten the way, a crowd of people with faces painted as calaveras and dressed in elaborate outfits, walk slowly on with heaviness in their hearts but a sense of happiness to be able to remember the ones they are walking for.

Sounds of drum beats hit you in the chest as the procession moves along the Santa Cruz river. People are dancing, clapping and cheering as the drum line hammer down their drumstick and maracas shake louder. The sound of a “grito,” a Spanish expression that includes the sound of a “ahh or aye” followed by a laugh, join in the sound of the Mexican music playing.

This procession is a tribute to Día de los Muertos, a holiday that most Latin American countries observe. Día de los Muertos is a holiday in which people celebrate their loved ones who have passed on from this life to the next.

People honor their loved ones by bringing flowers, baked goods and gifts for the spirits of the people who have passed. It is believed that on the night of Nov. 1, All Saints Day, that the spirits of passed loved ones return to celebrate with their living relatives and friends.

Those who are honored at the procession are not just family members, but close friends and even pets are honored.

Deanna Lopez and her family were walking somberly with the crowd for Dominic Romero, someone who was held dear to her family’s heart.



“He’s our extended family, he wasn’t our blood, but he is our nephew,” Lopez said.

Lopez was dressed in a bright red dress with a train so long it followed her as she walked, complete with a sombrero with photos around the brim of all the people who had passed on in her life.

“We’ve done [the procession] for many years. Everyone that’s on the brim of my hat is family that has passed but we made it bigger for [Romero]. He was the baby,” Lopez said.

A photo of Romero was on top of her hat, right in the middle with small candles to illuminate his smiling face. He had died on his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday in a hit and run car crash Lopez said.

“He was full of life...he was a cowboy, he did roping...just full of life,” Lopez said.

The procession has a deeper meaning than just dressing up, according to Lopez. People do dress up in beautiful dresses and costumes with pretty makeup, but it is more than that. It is about honoring family, she said.



That holds true for other procession walkers as well. Coming to celebrate the life of her grandmother that passed, Alison Harrington wasn’t as made up in the skeleton makeup and black lace garments, but she was there holding her grandmother’s photo high with love.

This wasn’t her first time at the procession. She explained that she has been coming to walk in it since she moved to Tucson in 2009.

“[It is] to remember those who have passed and to remember that one day, we too shall be those who are remembered,” Harrington said. “To remember that we’re not so far from death ourselves.”

Harrington describes herself as a person of faith and that is why she doesn’t view this procession or Día de los Muertos as a sad event, but an event of celebration of life and death.

“There is this wonderful thing in which our sorrow is mingled with joy and so we know that they are in a better place and then one day we will glad reunion and life to come. The combination of joy and grief together,” Harrington said.

Harrington had her daughter walking with her and holding a picture of her great grandmother as well, who she missed dearly, her mother said.

“For her to be able to publicly mourn in this community space, it’s a gift. It’s a blessing for me to be able to pass this [tradition] onto my children here in this borderland where our cultures mix together,” Harrington said.

Others at the procession take months to prepare what they are wearing for the procession, in order to honor not one particular soul, but all the souls that everyone else is walking for.

Local Tucson painter and tattoo artist Carrie Olaje said that her outfit was inspired by the overall beauty of the procession and how people take so much thought and pride into their costumes and photographs to mourn their loved ones.

“It’s a beautiful inspiration to see,” Olaje said. “I’m an artist so it’s a lot of inspiration for me as a painter.”

She was dressed in an all red jumpsuit with a headpiece that made her two feet taller. Her headpiece was covered in orange, yellow and burgundy flowers with small, intricate jewels and skeletons. An eyeball peeked through the feathers and jewels in the middle of her headpiece.



“To see everyone else celebrating, that’s what I like sharing. Seeing all the love everyone puts into their particular costume for loved ones,” Olaje said. “They all symbolize something for someone.”

She said she adds on to her costume so every year she comes to the procession, she has something new added onto her outfit and headpiece. Olaje walked with a skeleton staff, making her look as if she was an ancient Aztec warrior.

“There aren’t a lot of holidays that celebrate death in a positive way so I think it’s probably one of the rare times that people can actually look at it in a positive light and it’s transformative in that way,” Olaje said.

Paul Weir, the cultural engineer, technical director and board founder of Many Mouths One Stomach said that this year’s procession saw between 100,000-150,000 people walking for loved ones and 300 volunteers who worked it.

Volunteers gathered over 20,000 written letters or physical donations to be burned at the end of the night in the urn.

<https://youtu.be/R-6jXwcrNA>