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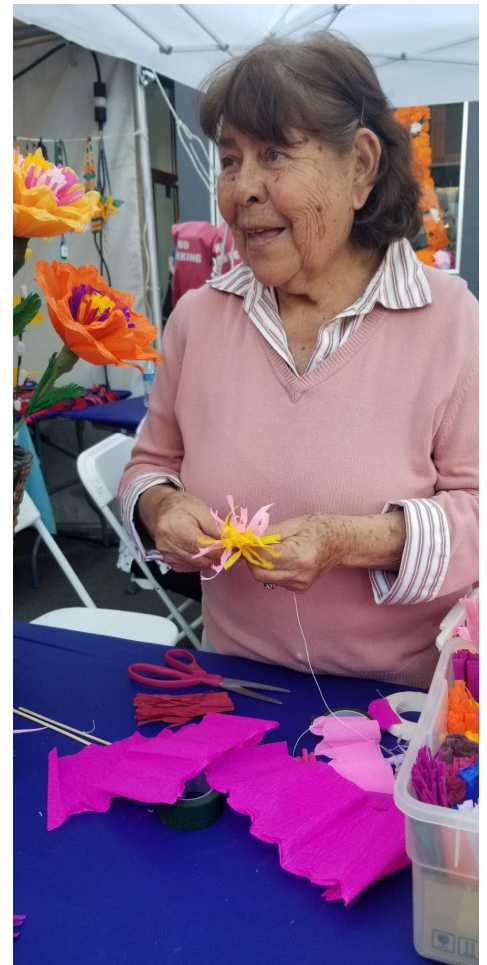
Paper Flowers

Dressed in a blush pink sweater, an apron wrapped tight around her round waist, standing only about five feet tall and with streaks of grey peeking out of her short bang haircut, Josefina Lizarraga huddles behind bushels of colorful paper flowers while chatters of Spanish and loud laughter come in waves from behind the table.

Her tiny, frail fingers carefully wrap a piece of bright purple paper around yellow and pink pieces as she meticulously crafts together a paper flower to add to her basket, while smells from corn grilling over a barbeque and sweet cinnamon waft over the crowd at the end of Pennington Street.

Ever since Tucson Meet Yourself began 45 years ago in 1974, Lizarraga has been folding her Mexican paper and teaching the many spectators how to make the flowers themselves.

At 82 years old, she is still going strong making flowers at TMY and enjoying talking with all the young children with red syrupy fingers from a melted snow cone, who stop by her booth. To their delight, she surprises them with a small paper flower for them to take home.



“I’m an old chicken,” Lizarraga laughed as she demonstrated how to pleat the paper to make a perfect petal. “Hijole! You did beautiful.”

Learning how to make paper flowers when she was a girl in Mexico, in the state of Nayait, Lizarraga perfected her flower making skills under the tutelage of a little Chinese woman.

“My mom had a restaurant and many people made flowers and I did not know how and then I started to make gardenias. It must have been ugly because it was my first flower,” Lizarraga said. “I put it on the girls (waitresses), and I just sat at one table just to look at how beautiful they looked with my flower, that’s what made me to get excited (about flower making).”

Lizarraga calls herself a master florist. Here in Tucson, she ran a flower shop, West Boutique Florist, which closed its doors in May 2015 after being open for business for over 52 years. Now, she comes to TMY every year to demonstrate the time old tradition of Mexican paper flower making.

“I started to see that this was much more appreciated than regular flowers,” Lizarraga said.

Of the 76 folk artists who participated in TMY, Lizarraga’s flowers were sought out by many event-goers.

Her bright flowers caught the eyes of children and adults alike, many asking if they could buy the whole basket.

“I just thought they were really pretty, it’s so interesting to hear about the culture,” Anna Langerova, a University of Arizona linguistics student who came to TMY, said.

One thing that Lizarraga appreciates is how the community has taken a liking and huge appreciation towards her flower-making.

Langerova did not know that Lizarraga would teach her exactly how to twist the paper to get the perfect petals when she happened to stop by her table.

She also didn't know that she would be getting a lesson on the complicated art that is Mexican paper flowers and the importance of paper flowers in Tucson's cultures.

Macy Clark, a local Tucson hairdresser who has been coming to TMY for a couple years, recently came back to the event to stop by all the new vendors and check out the new folk artists featured this year.

Clark happened to notice a yellow rose at Lizarraga's booth and quickly bee-lined over to Lizarraga's table to ask about a particular yellow flower that caught her eye and reminded her of someone special.

"My mom actually passed away and her favorite flower was yellow roses," Clark said.

Many people who were making flowers at TMY used them to place on the community altar, built by Ofelia Esparza and Rosanna Esparza Ahrens, guest artists from East Los Angeles.

They were two of many folk artists that had come from California to be featured at this year's TMY. This altar was a replica of the larger altar that will be built for Tucson's All Souls Procession, taking place on Nov. 3, 2019.

Clark and her family plan on participating in the procession, their first time seeing the large crowd of painted calavera faces carrying signs with photos of passed loved ones, decorated with many colorful paper flowers and lights to never forget about those who have passed.

“This is going to be our first time going to the All Souls Procession and I didn’t want to be disrespectful to the whole project, I wanted to be aware of what we’re getting ourselves into,” Clark said.

She and her family curiously wandered into the community altar space, gazing up and down at the many marigold flowers that were placed neatly next to framed photos of loved ones that Tucson’s community placed on the altar to be remembered.

The altar towered above everyone’s head, filled with heavy-hearted letters written in cursive and vintage black and white photos of people with big smiles on their faces.

Paper flowers are more than just a hobby, they are a small piece to the bigger, very prominent Hispanic heritage in Tucson, which can be seen all while walking around at TMY.

Over the course of the three-days of the TMY festival, approximately 150,000 people came to eat from the 55 food vendors, witnessed 87 performances from artists across Tucson and saw the artwork of 76 folk artists.