

All Souls Procession can be solemn and fun

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OTTO ROSS
Tucson Citizen

Thousands gather each year as the massive, teeming All Souls Procession deluges Fourth Avenue and winds its way downtown. Giant skeleton puppets and grotesque stilt walkers march alongside solemn, darkly clothed mourners. Some walk in contemplative silence while others whoop and yell.

For roommates Vanessa Allen, 22, and Drew Abromowitz, 23, the All Souls Procession is a party they wait for all year long. For Belinda Araneta, 45, the procession will be a time to reflect on her mother, who died in December.

"It's just a big blend where creative expression for living meets remembrance," Abromowitz says.

The procession is an annual event that coincides with the Mexican holiday, Día de los Muertos, a celebration of life and a tribute to the dead.

"It's a wonderful day," Araneta says. "We are all so busy in our lives that it makes you stop and really think about the person you're missing and some of the memories. That means the food they liked and the music they liked, as if they were part of your life still."

Following her mother Aurelia's death at the age of 83, Araneta has gone through a period of grieving and is beginning to cope with the loss. Preparing for the procession has helped her in that process, she says.

"It's really healing to be able to do this and it's a feel-good kind of thing, not like I feel depressed," she says sitting in the kitchen of her mother's home. "I think she would love the artsy excitement and music. She would love to be part of that, so why not take her?"

In the procession Araneta will carry a portrait of her mother, whom she describes as a charitable, eclectic, family-oriented woman who enjoyed spending time in the kitchen cooking meals for her family.

"She could make anything," Araneta says. "The woman could take leftovers and make anything, with no recipe, and she was fast!"

When Aurelia wasn't cooking she was either tending to her elaborate garden or painting. Nearly everything in the Araneta home is highlighted by Aurelia's bright and colorful touches. Door frames, windows, desks, beds, even shoes are all adorned with colorful flowers and small designs delicately brushed on their surfaces.

"She would paint phones, she would paint anything. At one point she was painting clothes," Araneta says. "We used to have a joke that if we stood still she would paint us."

While Araneta sees the event as a time for reflection and contemplation, she has no problem with those who take a more light-hearted approach to the procession.

"Everyone goes for their own reasons," she says. "At different times of your life that tradition holds a different meaning for you. So if you've never had a loved one pass away it might not mean as much to you; it's more like, 'Well let me dress up in my mask and have fun and walk around with people.'"

For Allen and Abromowitz the procession is more of a grand party than a time for mourning.

"I don't think remembrance is the pure essence of the parade when you look at the giant puppets and people walking on sticks and stuff like that," Abromowitz says. "If it was just a parade of people solemnly marching in remembrance I think it would be an entirely different thing, but it's meant to be a celebration of life and really festive."

Last year, the two roomies started a tradition of inviting people over to their Fourth Avenue home to drink, party and prepare for the parade.

"People brought fake flowers and their own makeup and extra costume pieces and people traded off," Allen explains.

"Totally, so if someone wants to stick a last-minute accessory in their hair or if someone shows up and they don't have face paint, at the very least everyone has makeup," Abromowitz adds.

To Allen and Abromowitz, lavish and unique costumes are a crucial part of the event. When asked what their ideas were for this year's costumes, Allen began to answer as Abromowitz ran off to another room to fetch his costume.

"I think the spirit of it is to kind of just put together whatever you can. What most women strive for is a white dress so they look like brides, but it's mostly skeleton face paint or girls have a lot of flowers in their hair," Allen answers as Abromowitz suddenly appears back in the room holding a homemade shell of an elaborate hoop dress.

"Best dead person ever, Marie Antoinette," Abromowitz explains giddily. "So this year there is going to be a big dress stitched on top of everything and I'm making a corset that shrinks me down to, (gestures a tiny oval with his hands,) and I'm just going to paint those shoes golden."

Like Abromowitz and Allen, many people put a lot of care into their costumes and see the procession as a great way to connect and socialize with other locals around Tucson.

"You meet a lot of people and the thing is, whether it's a Halloween run-off costume or a new costume for the occasion, this gives you the chance to really go the extra mile to do something awesome, and you're really recognized and in turn you recognize other people's amazing effort," Abromowitz explains.

For their get-together this year Abromowitz and Allen are expecting more than the 20 people who showed up last time. This year the party will be open to all, Abromowitz says.

"If people want to bring booze and not trash the house then we're good to go."

The spectacle of the procession intertwined with the rich cultural holiday has made the All Souls Procession a local staple and important event in the community.

"Every year the procession gets bigger and bigger and bigger and every year more and more people find a need for it, there's a need for this," Araneta says.

Allen and Abromowitz agree with Araneta's opinion that the procession is a key Tucson tradition.

"We're like totally into this thing," Allen says.

Adds Abromowitz, "Yeah, Día de los Muertos is amazing."

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Belinda Araneta will participate in this year's All Souls Procession to honor lost loved ones.

MORE INFO

IF YOU GO

What: 19th annual Tucson All Souls Procession
When: 5 p.m. Sunday

Where: The procession begins at University Boulevard and Fourth Avenue and continues through downtown, ending at the old railroad docks near Sixth Street and Stone Avenue.

Price: Free

Info: www.allsoulsprocession.org

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS EVENTS

PROCESSION OF LITTLE ANGELS: The Procession of Little Angels is a parade designed entirely for kids, held the day before the All Souls Procession. Children participate in art activities such as wing making, face painting, sugar skulls decorating, story telling and theater. Angels on stilts will lead the children on a procession around a downtown public square to the finale stage area, where artists present a live performance-spectacle. Have your children bring pictures, photos or drawings of their loved ones who have died. This may include pets, family members or friends. These items will be scanned and projected on the side of the library building. Children's Altar Project: Bring pictures, mementos, toys and other items to contribute to this evolving children's community altar. This is meant as both an altar for children to add items to, as well as families to honor children who have passed. When: 3-7 p.m. Saturday Where: Jacome Plaza, Joel D. Valdez Main Library 101 N. Stone Ave. Price: free Info: www.allsoulsprocession.org

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS ALTAR PRESENTATION: Take part in a traditional Día de los Muertos altar presentation. This ceremony honors those who have passed away and welcomes their souls back for the celebration. When: 9:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sundays through Nov. 15 Where: The altar is in Tolteca Tlacuilo in the Old Town Artisans Complex, 186 N. Meyer Ave. Price: Free Info: 623-5787

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS' AT CONTRERAS: Remember departed relatives and friends through photography, paintings, shrines and assemblages by Cathy Murphy, David Tineo, Carolyn King, Martin Quintanilla, Neda Contreras and E. Michael Contreras. The show runs through Nov. 29. When: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Where: Contreras Gallery, 110 E. Sixth St. Price: free Info: 398-6557

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS' EXHIBIT AT OBSIDIAN: The Mexican holiday honoring the dead is celebrated with an exhibit of ceramics, drawings, paintings, photographs and jewelry. With 14 participating artists, the show runs through Nov. 15. When: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Where: Obsidian Gallery, 4320 N. Campbell Ave. Price: free Info: 577-3598, www.obsidian-gallery.com

RAICES TALLER EXHIBIT: Community groups, guest artists and gallery members pay personal tribute to the "Day of the Dead" with altars, ofrendas (offerings), paintings and sculpture. The exhibit runs through Nov. 22, with a closing celebration set for 6-9 p.m. When: 1-5 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays or by appointment Where: Raices Taller 222 Art Gallery and Workshop, 218 E. Sixth St. Info: 881-5335, www.RaicesTaller222.org

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