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Honoring death, celebrating life: Skylawn Memorial Park hosts Dia de los Muertos festival

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This Halloween weekend, thousands of people are expected to gather not to ask for candy or try to scare their neighbors, but to honor their loved ones at the Skylawn Memorial Park's second annual Dia de los Muertos festival.

This multi-cultural memorial observance is about celebrating life with friends, family, food, music, art and more, said Leticia Pizziconi, Skylawn's community services supervisor who started the festival.

The free Saturday through Sunday event is open to people of all backgrounds to come enjoy the nearly 500-acre cemetery at the top of State Route 92 and Skyline Boulevard that will be marked by colorful altars, activities for children and festivities galore.

While trick-or-treating and ghoulish costumes typically reflect one's conception of Halloween, Dia de los Muertos celebrations mark a long-standing tradition dating back thousands of years with roots in Hispanic and Filipino cultures.

"Like in any culture, in the United States we have Memorial Day, I think [Dia de los Muertos] celebrates more of the soul. Instead of making it a scary topic, we try to make it festive. It's more inviting, it's more of a celebration of life," Pizziconi said, adding the non-sectarian cemetery makes an ideal venue. "Our location is absolutely wonderful. We're overlooking the Pacific Ocean with views of Crystal Springs. And we're central and we're surrounded by a lot of Mexican-American families."

Dia de los Muertos reflects the belief that the spirits of the dead visit their families and loved ones between Oct. 31 and Nov. 2. And while many fear the end of life, Pizziconi said Mexicans "look at death with the same fear as any other culture. But there's a difference, they reflect their fear by mocking and living alongside death."

From parents of Mexican decent, Pizziconi said she was moved to create an event at Skylawn and is pleased to expect nearly 2,500 to join her this weekend in commemorating the holiday.



Courtesy of Skylawn Memorial Park
Women in traditional Mexican dress dance during last year's Dia de los Muertos festival at the Skylawn Memorial Park.



Women with skull-painted faces and elaborate head dresses attended last year's festival.



As part of the event, various euphemisms for death and life can be found throughout the decorations that will adorn the cemetery and altars brought by families. Whether it's skeletons, skulls or flowers; artful interpretations of spirits, death and life can be found throughout Dia de los Muertos.

South San Francisco artist Evangelina Portillo said she's long been fascinated with the artistic representations and will be bringing sugar skulls for visitors and children to decorate then take home as keepsakes.

Portillo said she frequently creates large altars for Dia de los Muertos and they've varied from one dedicated to her sister who died several years ago, to another commemorating renowned artists Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. This year, she will be bringing a large altar she created to mark the 20th anniversary of singer Selena Quintanilla-Perez's death.

Passionate about art and her culture, Portillo also visits local schools to introduce children to the holiday. On Thursday, she visited Washington Elementary School in Burlingame where she brought sugar skulls for the children to decorate.

"I explain to them that it's not a scary thing, it's a happy time, you honor and celebrate your loved ones. And they get really excited," Portillo said.

Portillo said she makes nearly 30 to 40 pounds of sugar skulls each year and will be sharing them at Skylawn this weekend as well.

A farmers' market, Mexican food, grave decorating and numerous vendors selling a range of goods from clothing to jewelry will provide plenty to do at the cemetery. A Catholic service will be held at 10 a.m. Saturday and Sunday while a live mariachi band and both Aztec and Folklorico dancers will perform on alternate days.

The event is open to the public and Pizziconi encourages people from all backgrounds to gather, dress up and celebrate the Day of the Dead.

Dia de los Muertos runs 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Skylawn Memorial Park, at the intersection of Skyline Boulevard and State Route 92.

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