

Bronxites Celebrate ‘El Dia de los Muertos’

By Tadia Toussaint on November 3, 2015 7:35 am



Photo by Jordan Guerra, WHEDco

Latinos celebrated the Mexican ‘Day of the Dead’ in Melrose Bright yellow flowers, orange pumpkins and white skulls decorated the plaza on Brook Avenue and E. 163 Street, where many South Bronx residents came to celebrate El Dia De Los Muertos (the Day of the Dead) on October 21.

The Mexican holiday—in which people honor the souls of their lost loved ones—brought families together for dance, food, art and even health, in a way residents say they don’t often see.

With his face covered in red sugar crystals from his pan de muerto (death bread), the skull-shaped bread traditionally eaten during the holiday, 5-year-old Mexican-American, Omar Guerrero declared “This is so much fun!”

The Bronx Music Heritage Center hosted the event in partnership with its parent organization, community development organization Women Housing and Economic Development (WHEDco), and the Department of Transportation.

Guerrero, a student at WHEDco’s after-school program, came with his mother, Guillermina DeJesus, who said she honors her brother and father on the day. Though the two passed away in Mexico many years ago, she sets their favorite dish on the table, along with candles and Cempacuchil (yellow flowers), and hopes to feel their spirit. “I like to bring Omar to these kinds of things. He has to know where he comes from,” DeJesus said. “He doesn’t know completely what the holiday is about but he knows it’s a part of his culture. He thinks this is Halloween, and for now that’s ok.”

The festival offered arts and craft activities for children and free flu shots, and had fresh produce including apples, onions, and carrots available for sale. One table served hot cider and hot chocolate with flavored bread, conchas and pan de muerto.

A DJ played music from across Latin America, like bachata and merengue, until finally a guitarist wearing a sombrero played Mexican folk songs to serenade the festival’s attendees. Dancers from a Mexican dance company taught the audience Mexican dance steps while he played.

WHEDco, in conjunction with a private developer and city agencies, is building a facility adjacent to the plaza, to be known as Bronx Commons, will house the Bronx Music Heritage Center, which is now temporarily housed in Soundview.

“The South Bronx has always been a refuge for people with rich cultural traditions, said WHEDCo’s director of community development, Kerry A. McLean. “Events like this are designed to connect these cultural traditions.” The project is scheduled to be completed by 2017 and will offer affordable housing for elderly musicians, along with commercial space and educational facilities.

“I’m waiting to get in there,” said nearby resident, Chereen Morris, 38.

“It’s something productive to do with the kids. The neighborhood is changing and it’s for the better.” She and her 3-year-old son danced with the Mexican dancers near the stage.

Mexicans aren’t the only Hispanic group who celebrate the holiday. WHEDCo-employee Luz Lopez, who is originally from Ecuador, said that she honors her grandmother and her uncle by preparing ceviche, since that was her favorite dish.

“Though we are celebrating the life of the dead, this is very separate from Halloween,” she said. “It’s very spiritual,” she said. Contact Tadia Toussaint at tadia.toussaint@journalism.cuny.edu.

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