As fall turns to winter, communities worldwide are preparing to celebrate the memories of deceased loved ones in annual traditional festivals for the dead.
Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is one such tradition, bringing together music, dancing and delicious home-prepared food in gatherings that allow people to welcome the spirits of those who have departed to return for an evening. Originating in cultures indigenous to Mexico and established as a state holiday there in the 1960s, today the festival is also celebrated widely throughout Central and South America and in many places across North America.

The Moab Valley Multicultural Center at 156 N. 100 West will host its 7th annual Dia de los Muertos celebration on Sunday, Oct. 29, from 1 to 5 p.m. It welcomes the entire community to participate, or simply attend and enjoy the atmosphere of the special festival, outreach director Leticia Bentley said.

“To me, it’s a day to celebrate loved ones who’ve departed, and a day to remember and celebrate their lives and the years they spent with you,” Bentley said. “Spirits come to you and visit you, and fill you with love and positive energy.”

Anyone interested in participating in the festival is welcome to help decorate the MVMC courtyard on Saturday, Oct. 28, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., she said. The community is also welcome to reserve altars or tombstones, she said. There are even spots set aside to memorialize pets that have died.

“When preparations begin, just seeing people decorating the altars with so much love is a good experience,” Bentley said.

Bentley brought the first Day of the Dead festival to Moab as a cultural experience for her students when she was teaching Spanish and English as a Second Language at Grand County High School in 2003. After starting MVMC, she was eventually able to expand the festival to the full-day celebration it has become.

This year, the festival will welcome back Salt Lake City-based mariachi band Sol de Jalisco, and feature a live demonstration of spontaneous “graffiti art” mural creation. There will also be a reprise of the performance of Ballet
Folklórico that debuted at the MVMC Dance With the Stars fundraiser in September.

“The dance is very important,” Bentley said. “Dancing is happiness, and you want to honor those you love with happiness through music and dance, as well as the good food.”

All teachers in Mexico study Ballet Folklórico as part of their training, Bentley said, and she began to teach the art 10 years ago for a Latin American arts festival. Six women in the community, including several of the MVMC staff, have trained with Bentley for more than 20 hours of the last few months, and are looking forward to being part of the beautiful splash of color and energy to start off the festival.

“It definitely makes me feel more educated about folk art from Mexico,” said AmeriCorps VISTA outreach and education assistant Haley Austin. “I feel like I understand more having done it. I like learning in a way that I can appreciate and enjoy in parallel with experience from my own culture.”

Anyone interested in learning Ballet Folklórico is encouraged to contact the center for more information.

This year for the first time, Bentley will conclude the celebration by leading a healing circle. The women of Bentley’s family tribe in the village where she was raised will hold a similar healing circle following their Day of the Dead celebration. The elders of the tribe have asked members who live in other places around the world to hold such healing circles, sending love and positive energy to the Earth, Bentley said.

“Everybody is welcome,” she said. “There will be a lot of positive energy given by and for every person who comes.”

Multicultural center hosts Dia de los Muertos on Oct. 29
What: Dia de los Muertos

When: Sunday, Oct. 29, from 1 to 5 p.m.

Where: Moab Valley Multicultural Center, 156 N. 100 West

Cost: Free

Information: moabmc.org; 435-259-5444

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