Dia de los Muertos remembers the dead

by Sharon Sullivan Moab Sun News
October 29, 2015   Updated November 24, 2021

In Mexico and Central America, mariachi bands typically perform in cemeteries to serenade the spirits during Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebrations. The holiday is observed on Nov. 1 and Nov. 2, when people in
Latin America commemorate and celebrate the lives of loved ones who have died.

The Moab Valley Multicultural Center invites local residents to its annual Dia de los Muertos event on Sunday, Nov. 1, from 1 to 5 p.m. A mariachi band from Salt Lake City will perform; plus, there will be folkloric dance performances, face-painting, arts and crafts booths, authentic Mexican food for sale, and replicas of altars.

The event will be held at the multicultural center, 156 N. 100 West, and is a fundraiser for the organization.

“It’s important not to confuse Halloween with Dia de los Muertos, which is very spiritual,” and festive, MVMC outreach and service director Leticia Bentley said.

Dia de los Muertos is about celebrating the circle of life and death, and remembering the lives of loved ones who have passed on, Bentley said.

Moab’s Dia de los Muertos will include a replica of a cemetery, including tombs dedicated to both humans and pets who have died, as well as altars decorated with items to honor and welcome the returning spirits. Everything used for the holiday has meaning – for example, candles are placed on altars to guide the spirits on their once-a-year visit.

Copal incense, or pine tree sap, is burned to purify the area, and flowers are gathered to welcome the spirits, Bentley said. A special flower, the marigold, is used to guide the spirits to the altar. A stick next to the altars and tombs is placed there to chase away unwanted spirits, she said.

Water and food are offered to give spirits energy for the trip, and salt is provided for preservation of the spirit. A cross made of ashes symbolizes the four cardinal points, from which blessings are asked, Bentley added.
The skeletons and skulls associated with the holiday – those also have a powerful meaning.

“They’re a reminder to make peace with death; to know it is a reality and that it is time to think about what kind of story you’re leaving. It’s a time of reflection,” Bentley said. “What kind of story do you want your loved ones to read about you?”

Dia de los Muertos is always a festive event to remind people that “life is too short and we need to live life to the fullest and be content with what we have and make the best of life, and be grateful,” Bentley said.

The food for sale that day is “very authentic Mexican food,” prepared by the “best cooks in town,” Bentley said.

You can honor your own deceased loved ones with a tomb or altar by reserving a space at the Dia de los Muertos event. There are ten spots for pet tombs, and 23 for human tombs. A dozen altars are also available.

“We usually sell out of tombs,” AmeriCorps Vista volunteer Joanna Onorato said.

The multicultural center provides information and help on how to create a family altar, or tomb for the replica cemetery. The main things to include in a tomb or altar are a couple of items loved by the deceased, Onorato said. Peanut butter, for example, or a fishing pole for someone who loved fishing, she said.

To reserve an altar or tomb for your own family, call 435-259-5444. Instructions on how to create an altar or tomb are also available at www.moabvalleymulticulturalcenter.org.

“Life is too short and we need to live life to the fullest and be content with what we have and make the best of life, and be grateful.”
Multicultural center celebrates the lives of loved ones

Sunday, Nov. 1, 1-5 p.m.

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

Cost: Free

www.moabvalleymulticulturalcenter.org, or 435-259-5444