

Hilos que hablan:

The Textile Legacy and Life of Mariana Ornelas

Exhibit & Tribute: Sat. Mar. 9, 2019 • 6–9 pm at the Esperanza

By Gloria A. Ramírez

Before she passed into the spirit world on March 6, 2017, Mariana Ornelas—professor of Spanish and Mexican American Studies at Palo Alto College, community & neighborhood activist, Paraguayan harpist extraordinaire, and former board member of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center—donated her collection of beautiful textiles and huipiles to the Esperanza to help sustain its programming. To honor Mariana's wishes, we shall have an exhibit and sale of her textiles and huipiles on Saturday, March 9th in a fundraiser entitled, *Hilos que Hablan* (*Threads that Speak*), celebrating Mariana's life and her legacy gift to the Esperanza.



Mariana in one of her many huipiles that will be on exhibit & sale at the Hilos que Hablan event.

One evening, days before her passing, Graciela Sánchez, director of the Esperanza, Amy Kastely, Antonia Castañeda and Gloria Ramírez along with Lourdes Pérez and Annette D'Armatá visited Mariana at her home as she laid in her hospital bed in her living room, where she had hosted many an evening with friends playing the harp and sipping wine. Once again, she received friends there in her last days of life. We joined Lourdes Pérez in singing to Mariana one of her favorite songs, *Hasta Siempre*, dedicated to Che Guevara that she often played on the harp. We lifted glasses of wine in a toast to Mariana's life letting her know how much we valued her presence in each of our lives and in the lives of her students and colleagues at Palo Alto College and in her work with her community and neighborhood. Mariana was at peace, engaged with her visitors and aware of her state of being. It was then that she expressed to us her wish to donate her huipiles to the Esperanza.

The huipil had special meaning to Mariana as it does to the Esperanza that has them for sale each year at the annual Peace Market. This special article of clothing usually made of organic fibers such as cotton, wool or silk is worn by indigenous women in parts of Mexico and throughout Guatemala. It represents the pueblos and cultures of specific indigenous communities and is used for daily wear with more elaborate ceremonial huipiles

made for weddings or community celebrations. The colors, the symbols and the type of weaving in each huipil speaks volumes about the culture and spiritual beliefs of each indigenous community and their ties to the natural world.

Throughout the U.S. women have been drawn to the wearing of huipiles, particularly Latinas. In San Antonio, a group of Chicanas known as Mujeres del Huipil would meet and share stories of their lives as they wore their huipiles. The pipeline from San Antonio and other cities in, the U.S. to parts of Mexico, particularly Oaxaca, and to regions throughout Guatemala has included Chicana writers like news journalist, María Martín (in Guatemala), literary figures like Sandra Cisneros (currently living in Mexico) and mujeres working as scholars and artists connecting to the work of Mexican and Latin American feminists in the cultural arts and literary worlds. Many of these women wear the huipil as a symbol of solidarity in support of the struggles of indigenous women in Mexico and Central America.

Mariana's own interest in collecting and wearing huipiles speaks to her own sense of history and dedication to community. Grounded in her own sense of Greek identity, Mariana Sculos grew up in Framingham, Massachusetts but chose to live most of her life in San Antonio because of the people, the culture and the Spanish language.

After earning a bachelor's degree in Spanish and French from Marietta College in Ohio in 1971, she enrolled at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City to pursue graduate studies in Latin American literature. About the same time, she met a harpist from Paraguay and moved there to learn to play the Paraguayan harp and perfect her Spanish.

She gradually became enamored with Latino culture, especially Mexican culture, and that eventually led her to live in San Antonio. Ultimately, Mariana loved the harp as much as the Presiden-



An early performance of Mariana playing the harp at the old Esperanza space at 1305 N. Flores.



Mariana was part of the Free Speech Coalition that challenged the city's Pay Up or Shut Up policy.

tial Medal of Freedom recipient loved the accordion. She was Greek by birth but by all accounts with a Mexican heart.

In 1982 when she enrolled at Tufts University earning a master's degree in citizen participation and public policy, she met Willie Velásquez, founder of the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project and Mariana wound up coming to San Antonio to work for the organization. In 1997, she was hired at Palo Alto

College as a professor of humanities and sociology. There, Ornelas taught the first course in Mexican American women's studies and introduced students to strong female community leaders such as Maria Berriozábal and Rosie Castro. She also brought prominent jazz musicians to perform on campus. Mariana also co-founded the Dellview Area Neighborhood Association serving as president and served as a member of the city's Zoning Commission. When she wrote an article for *La Voz* in 2006 after a trip to China, her love and interest in historic preservation was well noted in how she wrote about the destruction and urbanization (gentrification) taking place in Beijing, China's hutongs [*Beijing's Rapid Urbanization and the Hutong*, October 2006, *La Voz de Esperanza*]. She noted in the article that in San Antonio "Citizens regularly appear before planning, zoning commissions and city council to block harmful development projects and push for sustainable environmental policies..." She goes on to cite the PGA debates, the 2003 Tree Preservation Ordinance and the proposed Aquifer Protection Ordinance sponsored by AGUA.

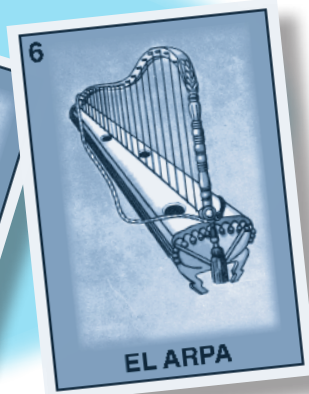
Mariana's dedication to community extended to the indigenous pueblos represented in her collection of huipiles that will be featured at the *Hilos que Hablan* event will include huipiles from

specific states in Mexico and multiple regions throughout Guatemala. We will strive to give some background on each huipil and have been assisted in the initial stages of organizing this event by Frances Herrera, huipilista and immigration lawyer in San Antonio and artist, Carolina Rubio. Huipiles exhibited for sale will include huipils from the city of Juchitán, Tehuantepec in Mexico that are made from heavy velvet featuring large floral imagery to huipiles from pueblos throughout the state of Oaxaca featuring animals, plants and nature. Huipiles from pueblos of the many regions of Guatemala will feature more intricate designs and tight weaving in the tradition of indigenous weavers who have for centuries worn huipiles. In addition to the huipiles, Mariana, a consummate traveler, also bequeathed clothing (dresses, vests and blouses) she bought from her travels throughout Asia and South America. These items will also be for sale.

We hope you join us in honoring and celebrating the life of this tireless advocate of social justice, inspiring teacher, consummate musician and dear friend on Saturday, March 9th, 2019 set for 6-9pm at the Esperanza at 922 San Pedro Ave. For additional information on the Mariana Ornelas Exhibit and Fundraising event, please call us at 210-228-0201 or email us at fundraising@esperanzacenter.org.

We invite you to submit any photos, video or other memorabilia that may be used in the exhibit honoring Mariana Ornelas, her life and legacy. Bring item(s) to the Esperanza at 922 San Pedro Ave. any day, Monday to Friday, between 10am-7pm, so we can make copies or scan photographs. The deadline to submit items is Friday, February 15th. Original items that need to be returned may be picked up by May 8th at the Esperanza or call 210.228.0201 for other arrangements.

Mariana's presence in our lives left us with a wealth of stories about her life. Should you wish to share a story about her, please email: fundraising@esperanzacenter.org with the subject "Mariana Story," or drop off a hard copy to the Esperanza at 922 San Pedro Ave. You can also call 210.228.0201 and we can pick up your stories. If you are not on our mailing list and wish to receive an invitation to this event email: esperanza@esperanzacenter.org.



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