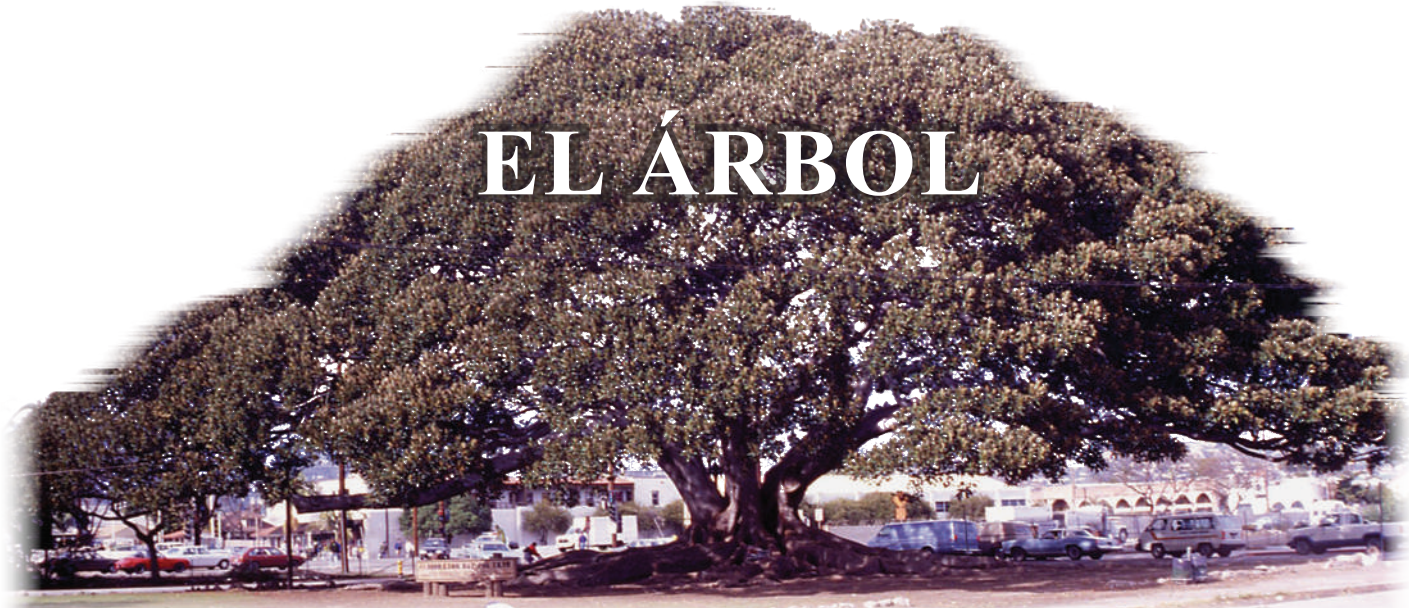


EL ÁRBOL



Santa Barbara's Moreton Bay Fig Tree located in Santa Barbara, California is believed to be the largest *Ficus macrophylla* in the United States.

by Julio Guerrero

I've always been awed by the beauty of trees, their robustness, their web of branches, leaves and changing colors to the point of thinking there is a special connection between people and trees at least that was the case with me as far as I can remember. Even at the elementary school age, I used to spend what seemed like long hours on top of the tree in our backyard playing games and enjoying the view from the top. For all I know it was not as tall as I remember it but for my age and size then, it seemed like a castle. Later on around 7, I was known for how fast I could climb a tree, there was only this other kid faster than me. Those are the best memories of my childhood—Peter Pan had nothing on me. I am sure I was not the only kid that fantasized building a house on top of a tree to live in.

Even now, somehow I pay special attention to songs that carry a tree as the subject. For all these reasons, I'll go as far as calling it a spiritual connection because it's occurred to me that we should say a prayer when we see a tree cut down but then again, it's not as if they die altogether because they stay around in the form of furniture, houses, utensils, toys, etc.

As I grew older I have learned to reconcile my connection to trees as a substitute for my father whom I never met hence, at least in my mind trees represent all a father should inspire in me; someone to play with, strong arms to hold me or swing from and a sense of strength, safety and protection from the rain or sun under their shade.

When my daughter was two, I would take her around the block for a walk after dinner. As we passed by a pine tree I would stop and tell her that trees are our friends, they care for us and we should hug them and care for them also. As much as I meant it, I doubt she understood any of that but it was always fun especially when I'd tell her to shake hands with the pine tree guiding her hand to shake the limb knowing that water would fall over our heads from an early afternoon shower. That she seemed to enjoy.

I remember in the early 80s I was in California in the middle of a life crossroads between jobs and not a place to live wondering what would I do next. The only thing in sight was a conference in the Midwest I had been invited to, which I saw as a possible place to land a job connection. So after making my last rounds in San Jose, it was time to drive to Los Angeles where I'd catch my flight to the Midwest.

My last stop was with Bob and Lily, two sweet souls that always looked after me. After a nice meal and inspiring conversation with them and two other guests, I said my good-byes thinking about the long drive ahead of me. Lily asked for a favor as soon as I got up. *"Our two friends here, are going south too, could you kindly give them a ride and drop them off in Santa Barbara,"* said she. Typical of California lifestyle, arrangements were made right then as I wholeheartedly agreed to the request, besides I thought of it as good company to keep along the way.

The two friends were, I thought "an odd couple." One, a young white hippie-looking guy and a "viejito," an older Mexican guy whose language abilities didn't seem to match. And, like me, carried their life belongings in a couple of duffle bags.

I really don't remember but my sense tells me that instead of taking I-5, we took Highway 101 to Santa Barbara. It could have been the scenic road or the conversation but the six hour drive didn't seem long. We talked about one another, what we did, our work and general stuff. I told them I had just finished a radio project for Cesar Chavez, other than that I was surfing my way through life trying to find myself and also the hard predicament I was facing, they told me about their work with the homeless.

As it turned out, these two men were not from San José but were actually from Oregon where they were part of a collective that fed the homeless regularly. The story went that Portland was not too happy about their charity work claiming that it would actually encourage homelessness instead of solving it. It also didn't help that their soup kitchen took place in the downtown area which affected the tourism industry. As a result the city government warned them that if they continued their activities they would be facing jail time, hence their journey to Santa Barbara at the invitation of some friends where they hoped to revive their soup kitchen to feed the local homeless community.

Mind you, this disparate pair looked to me more homeless themselves than someone in the business of feeding the poor, let alone making the trek of 1,000 miles south circumventing legal adversities in pursuit of their mission in life; simply sharing with others the little they had.

As we were approaching Santa Barbara I asked for their friends' address so I could drop them off, but to my surprise their answer was that they didn't have an address. *"Ok, a phone num-*

ber, maybe we could call them and get their address” I suggested. “No, our friends don’t have a telephone” was their response.

I have done my share of traveling, sometimes even without much planning but I always know who to contact and have an idea of where I’ll spend the night so although I wasn’t worried about their response, I was intrigued by their obvious carefree attitude. Arguing that I had to have a specific safe place where to leave them they told me “just drop us off at the fig tree”

No more vague an answer could I have expected, so I insisted “do you have names for your friends” figuring I could locate them through public records but they looked at me as if I hadn’t understood, referring back to the fig tree as a meeting point with their local connections. So I asked “where do I find this fig tree, do you know where it is?”

By this time we are already in Santa Barbara off the freeway driving along some random street and still have neither idea where I am going or what to do with my passengers feeling a strong sense of responsibility towards Bob and Lily since they entrusted them to me.

“Just ask directions for the fig tree to anyone” was their answer to my state of confusion. So knowing and accepting I’d look stupid I slowed down and dared, asking a young man that was jogging along, “Excuse me, can you please tell me how to get to the fig tree?” To my surprise he said without blinking “sure, just go to the end of the street, make a right and follow the street all the way, you can’t miss it.” Still feeling like I was in a dream, I followed directions and lo and behold, there it was the biggest fig tree I could have ever imagined. Sure enough, impossible to miss.

I approached the site slowly still trying to make sense of what was going on and was mesmerized by the majestic sight. The tree looked like a huge mushroom resting in a small pie-shaped park. I have seen many fig trees during my life and as healthy as they

can be with a beautiful wide tree top, they never grow taller than 15 feet or so, but this one had to be qualified as a giant fig tree. Later on I came to learn about the *Australian Moreton Bay* fig tree being a key landmark for the locals in Santa Barbara.

Another thing that impressed me although not surprised me was the several dozens of homeless people under the tree as if seeking protection under a big natural umbrella. As I pulled over and parked, my two passengers didn’t waste any time working their way out the door to join their new community, so I asked the younger fellow.

Are your friends here?

We don’t know, but we’re supposed to meet them here

Do you see them in the group?

I can’t tell, we’ve never met them before

So, how would you know?

Oh, we’ll know

I felt sorry for them so before he walked away I pulled out my last ten dollars bill and gave it to him. As he said thanks he gave me a small black book no bigger than a cell phone and told me it was a copy of a hand written bible, so that I could deliver it to Cesar Chavez.

As I drove away, I felt their aura stayed with me in the car and kept pondering on the whole experience as if in a daze. Here I was, worried about my personal well being, about what would I do next without a job possibility in sight and no place to stay, while these two men who had less than me, were more concerned about giving to others in worse shape.

BIO: *Julio César Guerrero earned a Master’s degree in both social work and telecommunications at the University of Michigan. A prolific writer, he is currently working on a series of stories related to loteria cards.*

José Esquivel 1935-2022

Premiere Chicano artist & sculptor, founding member of the Chicano art collective Con Safo, civil rights activist, visionary and philosopher of Chicano thought, art historian, Fox Tech High School graduate, depicted scenes of San Antonio’s Chicano barrio from abuelitas watering their yards to the casitas of his beloved West Side and mentored young, up-coming Chicano artists.



“He humanized the barrio, never sugar-coating nor glorifying it,” —Santos Martínez, Chicano Studies educator

“He not only honored our bicultural identities, our homes, communities and social action but gave us voice and visibility.” —Ellen Riojas Clark, UTSA profesora emerita

José was one of the early advocates for Chicano arts in San Antonio and continued to contribute to our community through his beautiful paintings, activism, and storytelling throughout his entire life. He loved Centro and we loved him. —Centro Cultural Aztlán

Read about José Esquivel at: bit.ly/Jose-Esquivel

Paul Cohen 1953-2022

Internationally recognized American saxophonist, life partner and husband of Mexican singer/actor, Lila Downs who was also producer and artistic director for her, and father of two children. Formerly, a circus performer, his 25 year plus collaboration with Lila Downs resulted in Grammy award winning albums and innovative music styles.“



No hay palabras que consuelen el dolor por el que estás pasando. Paul Cohen fue un ser único que te rodeó de amor verdadero y eso es una bendición [“Dear Lila, there are no words that comfort the pain you are going through. Paul Cohen was a unique being who surrounded you with true love, which is a blessing.”] —Singer, Eugenia León to Lila Downs:

NOTE: We shall always remember Paul for graciously facilitating Lila Downs’ concerts in San Antonio for the Esperanza Center that took place at Plaza Guadalupe (2004), Sunken Gardens (2009), Laurie Auditorium at Trinity University (2012) and at the Majestic Theater (2014). Our most sincere condolences to Lila Downs and their familia.