Rosa Guerrero: Cultural Dynamo

By Raquel Andrade-Carrillo, Safa Aboughalyoun, Jorge Flores, Lynette Martinez, and Melissa Saenz

Every culture is beautiful, every kind of language is beautiful, every kind of people, every color is beautiful.” So says teacher, humanitarian and internationally renowned dancer Rosa Ramirez Guerrero, who believes that cultural differences are the threads that make up the fabric of the United States. “I call it America, a tapestry of cultures.”

Guerrero was born in El Paso on Nov. 14, 1934, to doting parents, Pedro and Josefina Ramirez. Her childhood was filled with love and faith, and, because her parents had come from Mexico, a blending of cultures.

In an interview with El Paso Community College student Raquel Andrade-Carrillo, Guerrero recalled her childhood as “beautiful,” and admitted that she was her father’s favorite. Although her parents had little formal education, she and her four brothers and two sisters were taught early that education was important; they would conjugate Spanish verbs and learn world capitals just for the love of learning. Music and dance were also part of Guerrero’s life from the time she was born.

As a toddler, Guerrero would jump and bounce to music upon her father’s feet. Her parents loved to dance and would often take her to Juarez for dances and bullfights. At the age of five, and with her parents’ encouragement, Guerrero began to study dance and became a member of Aguilar’s Dance Academy. During World War II, the troupe performed for Fort Bliss soldiers at William Beaumont Hospital through the USO. In Password, a journal published by the El Paso County Historical Society, Guerrero reflected upon what a “peculiar sight” she must have made as the youngest dancer, dressed like Carmen Miranda and leading conga lines in an effort to entertain soldiers.

Although Guerrero’s life was filled with love, family, faith and culture, her family was like many others: money was in short supply. When she was about ten, she began cleaning houses for 50 cents a day, money she used for dance lessons. By eleven, she began teaching others to dance.

For Guerrero, learning folk dances taught her more than music and rhythm; it taught culture. Guerrero told interviewer Sarah Massey in 1995 for the University of Texas at San Antonio Institute of Texan Cultures, “When I hear the Jewish horah, [circle dance performed to the music of “Hava Nagila”], I become Jewish; when I hear the black gospel songs, I become black. … I become that part of the world.”

However, when she started school, Guerrero spoke only Spanish. Although a few teachers, like Guerrero’s kindergarten teacher, Mrs. French, reached throughout the Southwest was to punish children for speaking Spanish, often with a paddle. But other punishments included writing “I will not speak that dirty language [Spanish]” over and over. In her interview with Massey, Guerrero recalled that teachers “used to pull my braids! Or they used to pinch me, or they used to lock us in closets, or they used to make us eat chile [peppers].”

This prejudice made an impact. Guerrero failed the first grade because she didn’t know enough English. By the third or fourth grade, she had decided that she wanted to become a teacher. She vowed then that she would treat her students differently, saying to herself, “I will love them, I will teach them … I will inspire them.”

During World War II, Guerrero’s family moved from their home on Santa Fe Street to Rio Grande Street. She attended the old Morehead Elementary School on Arizona Avenue and Campbell Street. She translated letters to and from three of her brothers who fought overseas during the war, becoming the family’s bilingual “correspondence secretary.”

Guerrero was very popular during her years at El Paso High School. She participated in student council, the Physical Education Association and even the National Rifle Association. She was also the first Mexican-American drum majorette for her school.

As a junior, she began dating Sergio Guerrero, and they were married at the age of 19. “We were immature embryos,” Guerrero commented to Andrade-Carrillo about her marriage of more than 50 years to the former Coronado High School basketball coach and teacher.

Guerrero attended Texas Western College, now the University of Texas at El Paso. After giving birth to her first child as a senior, Guerrero became the first person easy to say: You are a beautiful child … the very center of the universe. And they feel it … And they believe it.”

Tapestry, which is still seen today in classrooms across America, gained national distinction when Guerrero was presented with the CINE Golden Eagle Award. The CINE Golden Eagle Award is given to professional and amateur filmmakers for portraying American life and thought realistically to global audiences. Among other filmmakers presented with the CINE are Steven Spielberg and Ron Howard.

In 1975, Guerrero founded her International Folklorico dance group, and under her artistic direction and choreography, Guerrero’s troupe entertained the public, performing at local venues as well as nationally on ABC’s Good Morning America. Guerrero’s dance group also performed for President Regan in 1981 at the Kennedy Arts Center. In 1989, Guerrero’s goals shifted, and she handed over direction of the group to three individuals, one being her daughter, Ana Moncada.

Guerrero began to travel extensively, promoting her message of accepting cultural diversity. From 1989 through 1994, she was a part-time lecturer for UTEP, and between speaking engagements, she wrote poetry, published her book, Rosa! Tapestry of a Woman (1994) and produced a sequel to her dance film, Tapestry II (1995).

But for this mother and grandmother, Guerrero’s proudest moment came in 1992 when the El Paso Independent School District named a Westside elementary school after her. This gave Guerrero the distinction of becoming the first living educator, as well as the first Hispanic woman in El Paso, and only the second in Texas, to have a school named in her honor.

In 1994, Guerrero was the 74th woman inducted into the Texas Women’s Hall of Fame. She is also an honoree of the El Paso Commission for Women’s Hall of Fame. In 1997, she had a granite marker awarded to her and placed on the Legends of Texas Bridge, joining luminaries such as Barbara Bush, Walter Cronkite and Tom Landry. That same year she received UTEP’s Distinguished Alumnus Award, and in 1999, she was honored by the National Education Association for her dedication in promoting human and civil rights. The Mexican Consulate gave the Ohtli Award to Guerrero for promoting Mexican culture for decades.

Among other prestigious honors presented to Guerrero are Life Membership in the Texas Parent Teacher Association; Outstanding Woman in the Arts (Women’s Political Caucus); Outstanding Woman Artist in El Paso (the Mexican American National Association); one of the Outstanding Hispanics in the Southwest (Adolph Coors, Co.); the Valley Forge Freedoms Foundation Award; and the LULAC Arts and Humanities Award. Recently, readers of Southwest Senior named her the Best Old El Pasoan Who’s Made the Most Difference.

Today, Guerrero is an artist-in-residence at UTEP’s Chicano Studies Department and is the spokesperson for Las Palmas Medical Center. She continues to speak publicly for the rights of the oppressed as well as to lecture on cultural values and parenting while volunteering with various community organizations.

She enjoys writing poetry and spending time with her husband, who constantly advises her to slow down. But for Guerrero, who said she wants to be remembered for her love and devotion to God, slowing down isn’t an option: life is beautiful and far too short. When her grandson once said to her, “Grandma, you’re not a regular grandma; you’re crazy!” Guerrero laughed and said, “I’m crazy for living; I’m crazy for life; let me be crazy every day.”

Rosa Guerrero teaches culture, goodwill and self-esteem through music and dance. (Photo courtesy of Rosa Guerrero)