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Saturday, November 14, 2009

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A 'Day of the Dead' in America

By [Rebecca Huval](#) on Nov 8th, 2009

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A woman holds a baby while sitting next to the grave of a child at the cemetery in Tzintzuntzan, Mexico October 31, 2009. Mexicans pay homage to their dead relatives by preparing meals and decorating the graves on the first two days of November. The Day of the Dead festival has its origins in a pre-Hispanic Aztec belief that the dead return to Earth one day each year to visit their loved ones. REUTERS/Claudia Dau

By Sam Petulla and Rebecca Huval

Amid a large papier-mâché skull, fresh flowers and a burning veladora candle, a Michael Jackson puppet sticks up, frozen

in a timeless, glowing toe-stand.

Hundreds have passed by this scene to celebrate the Day of the Dead, a Mexican holiday where friends and family memorialize the recently deceased, praying, talking, singing, or dancing for their souls, trying to speak to them.

The Day of the Dead — or El Día de los Muertos — is said to date to the B.C. years and is usually celebrated Nov. 1 and 2, coinciding with the Roman Catholic observances of All Saints Day (Nov. 1) and All Souls' Day (Nov.2). Anyone is allowed to fill the altar with objects — known as offrendas — with offerings, where they become part of the ceremony.

The tradition's origins might lie thousands of miles south, but uptown many people participate in the ceremonies.

“There's not a dead person without my remembrance,” said Lydia Cobos, 55, fashioning paper into the shape of a flower for an altar setup at the Union Settlement Organization in East Harlem.

Alfredo Flores, 39, went to El Museo Del Barrio to celebrate and watch a dance performance. “My wife's Dominican so I'm the only Mexican in the house,” Flores said. “I don't have residency, so I can't travel. I brought them here. We were talking about the tradition to remember what's it's like.”

Many, despite coming out and trying to celebrate, said New York City can never be home to a true Day of the Dead festival — the cultural divide is too vast.

“It's the environment in New York that swallows us with work, and we lose some traditions,” said Jose Luis Marino, 38, who attended El Museo Del Barrio's celebration. “We don't have the time or family here.”

Magdalena Victoria, 28, who lives in Washington Heights, agreed. “We're losing that tradition to time,” Victoria said. “There's not time here in New York with my factory job.”

And although she made it to El Museo Del Barrio to celebrate, Victoria expressed disappointment with how the tradition has changed. “Now, we talk on the phone, with my mom and brothers, to remember the dead. We say things like, ‘My grandfather used to really enjoy the countryside,’” she said, adding, “We celebrate Halloween more now, with my two kids.”

Elena Guevara, 32, celebrated at the Union Settlement Organization, but was nostalgic for Mexico's ceremonies. “Mom goes to Mexico and puts up the ofrenda for the grandmother. I miss helping my mom prepare the altar and buying yellow flowers at the market to prepare,” she said.

For others, who in Mexico would have made an altar at home and celebrated privately, the practical matters of city life have changed things, leading them to celebrate however they can.

“My apartment's made of wood,” said Marino. “So it would catch on fire if I used candles. I celebrate in my way and meditate for me, and see the dead ones in my sleep.”

Some have given up celebrating altogether.

“It's not the same quality as celebrating it in my mother country,” said Albert Roberto, who watched the Union Settlement celebration from a distance. “It doesn't feel the same. There, they have parties, and camp out in the churches all night. Here, they don't.”

But despite the cultural divide, others have pieced together a new ceremony out of the old traditions and what is customary in any American town or city — pumpkin buckets of candy and Halloween.

“We celebrate everything the way we would in Mexico,” said Luz Aguirre, an administrative assistant at Mano a Mano, an organization that promotes Mexican culture. “We have our own altar, though it's a little different. My kids is crazy about Halloween. Right now, she's dressed up as a fairy running around like crazy. But I know to be mindful of that while introducing her to Day of the Dead and keep doing it. I just add the American element. Sometimes we can't find the graveyard of our people, so we're celebrating at places like this and work around what you don't have.”

“When you come here and don't have it, you recreate it,” Aguirre said. “It's my culture. You can't leave it behind.”