

# Death Brings Out Cultural Differences

By Janelle Brown

**C**armen Pendley wanted to shed buckets of tears and show her grief at the funeral of a Boise friend. But when the Mexican native saw how reserved the other mourners were, she quickly stifled her sobs.

"It felt very, very different," remembers Pendley about her first funeral in the United States. "In Mexico, everyone would have been sobbing and praying over the body. Everyone would have worn black. But here, many people were dressed in colors. There was music. And even the widow tried hard not to cry."

Pendley, who has lived in Boise for 12 years and is the mother of two American-born sons, sees many differences between the way Hispanics and other cultures deal with death.

"For us, life and death are very close, we breathe them both in," Pendley says. "We don't hold back when someone dies."

From the fiesta-like atmosphere of Day of the Dead to the unabashed grieving that follows the passing of a loved one, many Hispanics mark death with a roller coaster ride of emotion.

The Hispanic Americans interviewed for this article say they view life and death as intertwined and that their culture imbues them with the sense that little separates the two.

"My mother used to tell me that when a child was born, we should be crying, not rejoicing, because he is coming into hardship. And when that child dies, we should be joyful because he has found peace," says Dan Ramirez, (BS, political science, '94) the executive director of the Idaho Commission on Hispanic Affairs. "In many ways, it is a reverse concept."

That is not to say that there is jubilation at the death of a loved one, Ramirez says. In fact, there is a period of intense mourning as family and friends don black and keep vigil over the body. But the mood turns happy later on, when the deceased are honored with food, presents, festivities and decorations during the Day of the Dead, held each year in early November.

"The Day of the Dead isn't morbid at all. It's a fiesta," says Alma Gomez, an adjunct professor of art at Boise State and a counselor for the College Assistance Migrant Program.

Altars festooned with grinning skeletons, candles, pictures and the deceased's favorite foods are the centerpiece of the celebration.

The altars are typically erected by family members in private homes, but Gomez has also organized exhibitions at Boise State in past years, in part to raise awareness about what is often a misunderstood

aspect of Hispanic culture. While some people unfamiliar with Day of the Dead seemed a bit uncomfortable when they first glimpsed the altars, Gomez says their hesitation vanished once they understood what the altars represented.

"The altars are a way of honoring the dead," she says. "It's a way to show respect."

According to Ana Maria Schachtell, (BA, elementary education, bilingual/multicultural, '91) observances such as Day of the Dead and traditional funerals serve another important function: They help Hispanics living in Idaho stay connected to their heritage.

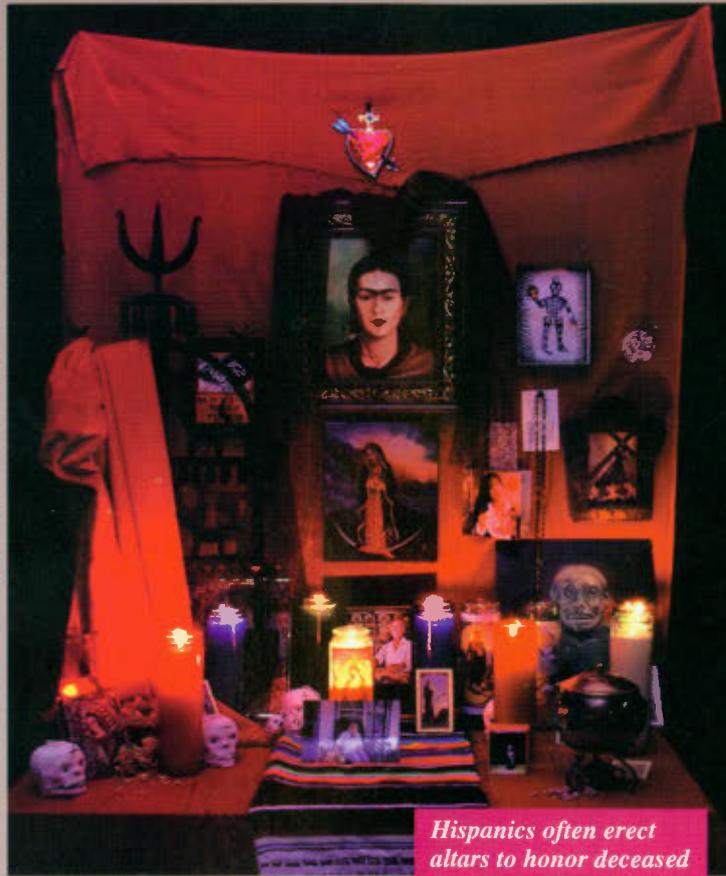
"A lot of Mexican people feel lost here, because it is such a different culture," says Schachtell, who chairs a board of directors that is working to establish a Hispanic Cultural Center in Nampa. "We need to find ways to help our children understand their roots."

The Hispanic approach to death is filled with healing and comfort, Schachtell says, in part because it revolves around family. She recently attended the funeral of her younger brother, an

event that brought four generations of her family together to mourn his passing and remember his life. This year on the Day of the Dead, she plans to erect an altar in her home to honor her deceased parents for the first time. Schachtell says she'll wait for her brother's death to recede further into the past before she remembers him with an altar of his own.

Schachtell still feels a sense of great loss when she talks about her dead brother and how he always had been her parent's "treasure." Being with her family for his funeral and grieving openly for him will make it easier for her to heal, she believes. It is during times like this, she says, when she's particularly grateful for her Hispanic heritage and its traditions for dealing with death.

"It's not a taboo for us to discuss these things," Schachtell says. "We are in touch with our emotions." □



Hispanics often erect altars to honor deceased family members during the Day of the Dead fiesta each November.

ALTAR BY ALMA GOMEZ COURTESY OF SCHEIDT PHOTO