

By  
Amigo Club

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## City of Ashland backs Amigo Club efforts

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Mexican Sen. Juan Carlos Romero Hicks visits the Hannon Library on the Southern Oregon University campus in this picture taken when he was in town several years ago. Juan Carlos and his brother Jose Luis earned master's degrees at SOU as early participants in the Amistad (Friendship) student exchange arrangement with the University of Guanajuato. Juan Carlos and his wife, Frances "Faffie" Siekman, who also attended SOU, will visit Ashland this November to attend the Ashland Amigo Club's Guanajuato Nights dinner and silent auction fund-raiser for its exchange-student scholarships. File photo by Kernan Turner

The city of Ashland became a non-voting municipal member of the Ashland Amigo Club this year, paying \$2,000 a year in membership fees to help support Amigo Club activities, especially those related to the annual Fourth of July visits to Ashland of Guanajuato representatives.

In June, Mayor John Stromberg appointed Councilor Rich Rosenthal as the city's liaison to the Amigo Club to assist in the planning and execution of Sister City related activities. Rosenthal has visited Guanajuato several times, even taking a Little League baseball team there this summer.

Acting on behalf of the board of directors, Amigo Club President Betzabé "Mina" Turner said Rosenthal was a "perfect fit," who would enhance the club's mission of supporting strong ties between Ashland and Guanajuato.

Ashland belongs to Sister Cities International, which grew out of a White House Summit held in 1956 to explore how people-to-people contact between countries might avoid future wars. It calls itself "a champion for peace and prosperity by fostering bonds between people from different communities around the world ... one individual, one community at a time." It focuses on four main areas of exchange: arts and culture, youth and education, business and trade, and community development and technical exchange.

In 1967, Ashlanders led by Southern Oregon University professor Graciela Magdalena Tapp, better known as Señora Chela, literally knocked on city and university doors in Ashland and Guanajuato, seeking an affiliation. Tapp had first visited Guanajuato in 1952 and was charmed by the people and the beauty of the ancient mining town. Starting in 1968, she took Spanish students, professors and townspeople on a bus tour of Mexico, the first of 30 such trips.

Meanwhile, she and a few friends in Ashland formed the Amigo Club, today a tax-exempt cultural charity, to encourage Ashland and Guanajuato to establish formal Sister City relations. This year is the 46th anniversary of the club and Sister City ties.

By 1970, the Amigo Club coordinated “Guanajuato Amigo Days” in Ashland. Some 40 Mexicans came to town for a week, including city officials, university officials, the Estudiantina de Oro troubadours, and the Guanajuato festival “queen” and her court. Guanajuato continues to send an official delegation, including the festival queen, to Ashland each year to participate in the Fourth of July Parade and celebrations, and Ashland sends two high school students to Guanajuato to participate in its major summer festival.

One of the Amigo Club founders, Ken Jones, said the 1970 visit opened an international horizon for Ashland, at the time an even smaller and culturally homogeneous community than it is today. Jones called it “the first full scale intercultural event in Ashland. In homes, schools, college, churches, and Festival, it was our first exposure to a sizeable group from another nation.”

From the start, a major component of the relationship has been the Amistad (Friendship) student exchange between Southern Oregon University and the University of Guanajuato.

The two universities have reaffirmed the Amistad agreement down through the years. More than 1,000 students, academics and administrators have participated in the exchange, including 81 students who celebrated cross-cultural marriages. Many of the Guanajuato students who graduated from SOU are living and working in the Rogue Valley today.

The Amistad program’s Master in Management arrangement allows University of Guanajuato students to receive a master’s degree from SOU by attending classes at the University of Guanajuato taught by visiting SOU professors.

The Amigo Club has recently created an endowed scholarship to encourage student exchanges, and will hold a Guanajuato Nights dinner and silent auction on Nov. 14 at the Elks Lodge to raise funds.

*Amigo Club’s Entre Amigos (Between Friends) column about Ashland ties to its sister city Guanajuato, Mexico, appears on the third Tuesday of each month. Longtime AP reporter and bureau chief Kernan Turner is an Ashland resident and Amigo Club member.*