

Ashland, Guanajuato celebrate 50 years of sister-city friendship

by John Darling for the Mail Tribune
Friday, April 5th 2019



[First Photograph: SOU President Linda Schott, her husband Thomas Fuhrmark, Ashland Mayor John Stromberg](#)
[Second Photograph: Guanajuato Fire Dept. Rafael Mata, Guanajuato Security Chief Samuel Ugalde, Ashland Fire Dept. Chris Chambers](#)
[Third Photograph: Guanajuato City Councilor Karen Burstein](#)

The 50 years of Sister City and Sister University bonds between Ashland and Guanajuato, Mexico, have fostered much *felicidad*, with hundreds of close friendships, more than 750 students and faculty in exchange programs, and 81 cross-cultural marriages.

Those bonds are being celebrated in Ashland over five days, as the two cities and universities renew the sister agreements originally signed in 1969.

It was the first sister relationship for both cities, and the historic, artistic and scholastically minded Guanajuato, with a student enrollment over 30,000, has gone on to form sister ties with more than 300 other universities.

“I hope each of us will see this anniversary as a waypoint at which we can pause, reassess and re-energize before continuing our journey together,” said Southern Oregon University President Linda Schott. “Let’s contemplate the future, how our partnership relates to our changing world and what steps we should consider to keep our efforts fresh and relevant.”

One contributor to festivities, Ashland artist Denise Baxter, said her recent mural-painting jaunt to Guanajuato, where she mentored 10 local students, “so affected my life, my family and brought my daughter back there. She fell in love with the city and studied a semester there, in total Spanish immersion, and came back fluent.

“It’s amazing how strong the ties are. They are very open to receiving Ashland visitors. I never imagined. They just took her in and it didn’t cost me anything. I’m a strong proponent of diversity and international commerce. It’s so important, and this is a shining example of what everyone should be doing.”

At an SOU welcoming breakfast Friday, Mayor John Stromberg said ongoing person-to-person relationships “are the only real way to change the world, and that principle is part of the Sister City bond, and that’s why it’s so important to get to know each other as people. It may have effects that reach far beyond our community.”

The 50-some guests now in Ashland from Guanajuato are staying in the homes of local people and deepening ties by “living with someone and helping them through their daily lives,” said Ashland Chamber of Commerce President Mary Gardiner.

One University of Guanajuato student who did graduate work here in the '80s has now risen to a top position at UG and works to keep those doors open for others, she said.

“Our relations are not political. It’s a people-to-people connection and it can help in the process of avoiding other kinds of conflicts in the world,” Gardiner said in an interview.

Chamber Executive Director Sandra Slattery saluted Chela Tapp-Kocks, who, as an SOU professor, began the exchange by taking the first group of SOU students there — and continued it through the decades with the 100-member Amigo Club here.

Tapp-Kocks became the only foreigner to receive Guanajuato’s annual “El Pípila de Plata” award, normally given each year to a Guanajuato citizen for “friendship and service” to the city.

“It would not have happened without her,” Slattery said.

She added, “May we welcome them with open arms as we work for future strengthened relationships and new partnerships to create peace and friendship in our world.”

Since becoming tax-exempt five years ago, the Amigo Club has raised \$160,000 in donations for its Endowed Scholarship Fund, administered by the SOU Foundation — and has granted five scholarships to SOU Amistad-exchange students for study at UG, stated President Betzabé “Mina” H. Turner.

Ashland has donated firefighting vehicles, and several Ashland civic clubs have undertaken special projects in Guanajuato.

The Ashland visitors will dine in downtown restaurants, tour the campus, city government facilities, Lithia Park, Mt. Ashland Ski Area, La Clinica Wellness Center, area wineries and attend Our Lady of the Mountain Church, a breakfast at Temple Emek Shalom, "Hairspray" at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and a SOU concert.

The concert will feature four new commissioned works from SOU's faculty at Oregon Center for the Arts, along with a composition by Javier Gonzalez Compean from Guanajuato.

Universidad de Guanajuato Rector Luis Felipe Guerrero Agripino, who has an interest in crime prevention, will meet with faculty from SOU's psychology and criminology departments.

Visitors and SOU faculty will share "professional development opportunities" about transforming teaching and "becoming universities for the future." They will attend ceremonies at the International Peace Flame of SOU's Thalden Pavilion.

Delegations from the city of Ashland and SOU will participate in 50th anniversary festivities in Guanajuato May 27-31 and be hosted in the homes of locals there. The 50th anniversary will also be celebrated in Ashland's Fourth of July parade.