

Ashland, Guanajuato celebrate 50th sister-city anniversary

by Kernan Turner

Tuesday, April 16, 2019

Ashland and Guanajuato, Mexico, began celebrations last week of the 50th anniversary of their sister-city relations. Some 50 “amigos” from Guanajuato came to town, and a like number of Ashlanders will travel in May to Guanajuato.

Mayors John Stromberg of Ashland and Mario Alejandro Saldaña kicked off the week’s celebration by proclaiming “Guanajuato Day” on April 8.

The visitors were feted each day by breakfasts, dinners and receptions and activities ranging from playing in the snow at Mount Ashland to city tours and buffet dinners, and an Oregon Shakespeare Festival performance of the play “Hairspray.”

At week’s end, Graciela “Señora Chela” Tapp-Kocks flew to Guanajuato to receive honors as the first foreigner ever honored as a “Distinguished Citizen of Guanajuato” for her visionary leadership in the late 1960s that led to the link between the two cities and their universities.

The Ashland Chamber of Commerce had earlier announced Tapp-Kocks as the grand marshal for this year’s Fourth of July Parade.



Courtesy photo. Mexican Congressman Juan Carlos Romero Hicks greets Graciela “Señora Chela” Tapp-Kocks in Guanajuato after she receives its Distinguished Citizen award.



Pictured at an Ashland Amigo Club Party: Amigo Club trailblazers Señora Chela (second from right, back row) and Marianne and Leo van Dijk (front row) join (left to right, back row) Amigo Club President Mina Turner and Ada Hodgen, and (far right) University of Guanajuato academic Ericka Gonzalez. Photo by Jay Ach.



A happy group of Guanajuato visitors ride the chairlift at Mount Ashland. Photo by Jay Ach.



Guanajuato visitors and Ashlanders gather at the Hannon Library at Southern Oregon University. Photo by Graham Lewis.

Guanajuato, Mexico and Ashland, Oregon celebrate 50 year anniversary

by Caitlin Fowlkes
Monday, April 15, 2019

The Ashland Springs Hotel grand ballroom was filled with laughter, color and diversity Wednesday night as Ashland said farewell to its 57 Guanajuato visitors.

Salt-rimmed margarita glasses sat beside vases filled with tiny flags of various Latin American countries, and the strumming of Spanish music played on an acoustic guitar wafted alongside the aroma of fajitas and roast chicken at the last event celebrating 50 years of sisterhood with Guanajuato, Mexico.

It might have just been the tequila, or it might have been a week of celebrating a half century of friendship, but guests were absolutely glowing.

Visitors from the sister city enjoyed a week packed full of Ashland sights and treats ending with a large party thrown by the Amigos Club, the organization that promotes the relationship.

Señora Chela Tapp-Kocks, the driving force between the two cities' relationship, said it's been an incredible, sentimental week for her. She said she was flooded with all the memories from the past 50 years during the anniversary celebration.

"It's quite a powerful impact when you see it all in front of you," Tapp-Kocks said. "This sisterhood has affected lots of people, and those people have created ripple effects impacting other people. It's intangible how many people this has touched. We've worked with thousands of students."

Once a Spanish professor at Southern Oregon University, Tapp-Kocks toured with her students through Mexico, always ending in Guanajuato, a city much like Ashland — from the mountain peaks to the theater culture. Eventually SOU and the University of Guanajuato formed a student exchange program, and soon after the towns became official sister cities.

The cities have been intertwined ever since, hosting visitors annually, supporting each other with public safety trainings, friendly gatherings and even participating in each other's Little League games.

“We're a part of this beautiful thing that has changed us in so many ways,” Tapp-Kocks said.

The connection has become one of the oldest and most active in the sister city program envisioned by President Dwight Eisenhower after WWII as a people-to-people program to further world peace, according to the Amigos website.

“The government started this experiment years ago and has more or less forgotten about it,” Tapp-Kocks said. “But this does work. It is a profound meeting of cultures and minds.”

Tapp-Kocks will receive the Distinguished Citizen of Guanajuato Friday in Guanajuato — if her layover in Colorado isn't delayed due to a snowstorm hitting the region. This will be the first time that a non-Mexican resident receives the award.

During the various visits between the cities, which usually include dignitaries, residents, students and members of community organizations such as the Rotary Club, Lions Club and Amigos Club, visitors stay with host families. There are third generation visitors now, Tapp-Kocks said.

For Rodrigo Leon, a legal advisor for the mayor of Guanajuato and the City Council, this was his first visit to Ashland. He said he was surprised by how much the two cities resemble each other and how welcoming Ashlanders were.

“We are creating bridges which will last 50 more years,” Leon said. “Language is not important. We are a perfect example that there can be international peace. At this time of political crisis, we need to think globally, but act locally.”

He said he was shocked by the quality of the people in Ashland.

“Most of us were strangers, and people here are so accepting of strangers,” Leon said.

He said his favorite part of his trip was the winery tours.

During their visit, guests saw the Oregon Shakespeare Festival play “Hairspray,” visited Mount Ashland (a first snow experience for many), toured local wineries, art galleries and churches, and met community members.

“We wanted to showcase Ashland authentically — the culture, the food and the outdoor recreation,” said Ashland Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Sandra Slattery, who co-chaired the committee behind the celebration week.

She said Guanajuato has recently started producing wine after a very long break, and so touring Ashland wineries was a fun item on the agenda.

Guests also had an authentic American barbecue at Grizzly Peak Winery, created art at the Ashland Art Center and paid a visit to the International Peace Flame.

The mayor of Guanajuato, Alejandro Navarro Saldaña, presented Ashland with a plaque of International Peace from Guanajuato.

Many gifts and awards were exchanged between the two cities. Ashland City Councilor Stefani Seffinger said she and her husband gifted dignitaries with glass art they made to take back to Guanajuato.

“The week was wonderful,” Seffinger said. “We made so many new friends.”

Mayor John Stromberg signed a proclamation Monday announcing April 8 as Guanajuato Day.

Guanajuato Mayor Saldaña had to leave before the party, but in a letter he wrote to Stromberg he said, “The uniqueness of this international program: of bringing together two cities, two cultures and two countries in such a close manner that involves exchanges of all the levels of our societies is truly humbling and challenges the leaders to preserve and to reciprocally continue the past and present exchanges and traditions, and also create new bi-cultural experiences.”

He said Guanajuato is excitedly anticipating the visit from Ashlanders from May 27 to May 31 this year.

Ashland City Administrator Kelly Madding said the best part of the connection is that we learn how different we are from one another, but also how very similar we are.

“This is a great thing to bring people together,” Madding said. “We get to recognize our humanity.”

Guanajuato Fire Chief Daniel Barrera Vazquez said this was his eighth visit to Ashland. The first was 25 years ago because of the student exchange program.

Amigos Club President Mina Turner was gracious enough to translate his interview.

“The friendship relationship has brought many benefits to my fire department and has produced many friends,” Vazquez said.

He said his fire department is composed of 82 volunteers and runs off donations and sponsors from the local community. Just like Ashland, Guanajuato and the surrounding area is very prone to forest fires.

Every May he sends three firefighters to train with Ashland Fire and Rescue. He said because of the training received in Ashland, Guanajuato has begun conducting controlled burns to better manage its forest health.

He said because the department is volunteer-run, they begin recruiting children at young ages to train them and encourage them to work in the fire department when they grow up, and the tools they take with them from Ashland help significantly.

Ashland has donated fire trucks, ambulances and medical equipment to Guanajuato over the years, according to the Amigos website.

“The training we have received in Ashland has helped greatly to prevent and manage fire, but the most important thing is the friendship that exists between Guanajuato and Ashland,” Vazquez said. “We consider them family.”

“Tonight’s reception was like the last night of a tropical cruise on which everyone had found romance that they would never forget for the rest of their lives,” Stromberg said. “Vive Guanajuato! Vive Ashland!”

The Amigos Club is currently collecting donations to build “baby packets” visitors will take to Guanajuato to give to the expecting mothers in the surrounding areas.

The club also raises money to fund scholarships for SOU students to participate in the student exchange program.

To learn more about the Amigos Club or to make a donation,
see ashlandamigoclub.org.

ashlandtidings.com/news/top-stories/guanajuato-mexico-and-ashland-oregon-celebrate-50-year-anniversary?jwsourc=cl