

Celebrating 50th anniversary in Guanajuato

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Monday, June 17th 2019



Ashland delegation joins school children in a welcoming parade through one of Guanajuato's narrow, historic streets during 50th anniversary celebrations of sister city relations.

Warm greetings and the altitude of the Guanajuato International Airport (5,956 feet) left Ashland visitors nearly breathless as they arrived in Guanajuato in late May to commemorate the 50th anniversary of sister city relations.

Their welcoming hosts whisked a group that landed at midnight Saturday, May 25, at the airport to the capital city (elevation 6,600 feet) in time to get a few hours of rest before rising early for a ride to the geographical center of Mexico atop a 9,000-foot peak.

A breathtaking week's agenda followed with nearly every gathering bringing standing ovations for Graciela Magdalena "Señora Chela" Tapp-Kocks, retired Southern Oregon University language professor and founding visionary of the three pillars of sister city relations: the city governments, the Amistad (Friendship) student exchange program between SOU and the University of Guanajuato, and the Ashland Amigo Club.

One day, more than 80 Ashlanders joined hundreds of elementary-school children waving tiny U.S. and Mexican flags in a parade organized by Jesús Antonio Borja Pérez, city director general of culture and education. Together, they joyfully squeezed through narrow, cobblestone streets to the steps of the University of Guanajuato, where the children sang Mexican and American songs, including "Oregon My Oregon" and "This Land is My Land," with lyrics altered to refer to Ashland and Guanajuato. Señora Chela had honed their perfect English diction on an earlier visit to Guanajuato.

Kocks received awards and testimonials for her shepherding of sister city relations over the past 50 years at a UG-hosted dinner and another banquet and dance offered by the "Ex-Alumnos," which also presented a "Community Merit" award to Betzabe "Mina" Turner, Ashland Amigo Club president.

The week's meals were variously provided by host families, the Rotary, Lions and Guanajuato Amigo clubs, the police and fire departments, the Association of Hotels and Motels, the "Ex-Alumnos" Association of the Amistad (student exchange) Program, and Karen Burstein's Valadez and La Virgen de la Cueva restaurants.

The Heroic Volunteer Firefighters of Guanajuato and the Chamber of Hotels offered elaborate outdoor buffets. At one, the internationally acclaimed Estudiantina de Oro singers and instrumentalists serenaded Señora Chela with her favorite songs, including "Spanish Eyes." She tearfully recalled the song playing years ago when she wed Ashland dentist, Dr. Marvin Kocks, who admired the color of her eyes.

Señora Chela learned in April at 50th-anniversary celebrations in Ashland that she and Mexican Congressman Juan Carlos Romero Hicks had been named grand marshals of the Fourth of July Parade, celebrating this year “50 years of Friendship” between the sister cities. She was in Guanajuato a week later to receive a Distinguished Citizen of the Year Award, as the first foreign recipient.

Reflecting later on the attention and awards she received in May, Señora Chela said, “I know that I am accepting the recognition on behalf of so many others who have ... participated in the ‘people-to-people’ mission in their own individual and collective manner.”

She added, “I truly feel that it is on behalf of these visionary participants that I am symbolically being honored. They have done grand work to bring two communities together. So, I say let us award and recognize each other and be proud of what we have accomplished, and continue for at least 50 years more.”

Other highlights of the week’s activities were visits to museums, separate folkloric ballet and Guanajuato Symphony Orchestra performances at the Teatro Juarez; a “Friendship that Lasts” art exhibit; the signing of separate formal accords by the mayors of the two cities and the presidents of their universities; and visits to a mine and to neighboring San Miguel de Allende.

Romero Hicks and his brother, José Luis, presented a symposium on Mexico-U.S. relations. SOU formally recognizes them as “Distinguished Alumni.”

Ashland placed a “peace flame” in Guanajuato’s Plaza de la Paz (Peace Plaza) under the guidance of Irene Kai and David Wick, co-founders of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, and the Ashland Amigo Club formally presented gifts of baby-clothes kits to some 100 miners’ wives.

This week, Señora Chela is making her fourth visit to Guanajuato this year, accompanying two Ashland High School “ambassadors” she groomed for song and dance performances there, Aubrey Reynolds and Taiga Sherman.



A portion of the 85 Ashlanders who traveled to Guanajuato face the camera at the base of a the a statue depicting fictional characters Don Quixote and Sancho created by Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra.



Señora Chela stands during a sidewalk breakfast in Guanajuato, joined (l-r, standing) by Guanajuato Amigo Club President Clarissa Abascal; former Guanajuato Mayor José Ignacio Reyes Retana, who signed the original sister city document 50 years ago; and former Guanajuato Mayor Eduardo Knapp. Front row (l-r) current Mayor Alejandro Navarro, Southern Oregon University President Linda Schott, University of Guanajuato Provost Hector Efrain Rodriguez de la Rosa, and SOU Provost Susan Walsh.



Amigo Club stalwarts stand at monument to 50th anniversary (l-r): Ashland President Betzabé “Mina” Turner, Karen Burstein of Guanajuato, Graciela “Señora Chela” Tapp-Kocks, Ashland board member Marina Kendig, and Guanajuato President Clarissa Abascal.



Guanajuato grade-schoolers perform a folkloric dance for visiting Ashland delegation attending 50th anniversary celebrations of sister city relations with Ashland.



Señora Chela Tapp-Kocks receives a shawl from Susana Montalvo during a banquet-dance offered the Ashland delegation by Guanajuato graduates of SOU during the 50th anniversary of sister city relations in Guanajuato.