

## **Entre Amigos: Sister City universities get down to business**



University of Guanajuato professors in Guanajuato and Southern Oregon University professors in Ashland met virtually in a video conference with SOU President Rick Bailey. Pictured on the video conference screen are (clockwise from top left): Dr. Rene Ordoñez, Dr. Martin Pantoja, Dr. Bailey, and Dr. Dee Fretwell.

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## **Southern Oregon and Guanajuato professors to trade visits, small business plans**

By Kernan Turner

Southern Oregon University and the University of Guanajuato are collaborating on a project for their business school students to provide development plans for rural and small businesses in Mexico and the Ashland area.

Two Guanajuato professors, Dr. Lari Viiano and Dr. Martin Pantoja, will visit Ashland with nine students April 2-10 to attend a seminar on doing business in the United States before undertaking a week of interviews and research at the selected Ashland businesses.

SOU professors Dr. Dee Fretwell and Dr. Rene Ordoñez will take students to Guanajuato in May to do similar work.

The professors received a \$25,000 “100,000 strong in the Americas” grant to create the joint business-development program at their universities. Grants sponsors are Partners of the Americas, the U.S. State Department, and the U.S. Embassy in Mexico, with money from the embassy, the Coca-Cola and Mary Street Jenkins foundations and Sempra Energy, a natural gas utilities holding company.

Pantoja says the program represents “a new stage and diversification of collaborative options” in the Amistad Program, an academic exchange begun 52 years ago between the two universities as part of Ashland-Guanajuato Sister City relations.

He said the project resulted from the two business schools’ Collaborative Online International Learning Initiative that formed when the COVID-19 pandemic blocked in-person contact.

The grant funds a combined “university program for multicultural distance learning by young business students and the reduction of inequality of micro and small businesses in non-urban areas,” Pantoja said.

Guanajuato and Ashland students have each created three-member teams who soon will join an online kickoff video conference that will include intercultural ability-learning activities.

At the end of the one-week visit, the students will present proposed business development plans to advisory faculty and the owners of the businesses.

“The project offers several benefits to both communities, institutions, students, and the development of the Amistad Program,” Pantoja said. The University of Guanajuato already has developed a new international course and SOU has updated two courses to include international content.

“Students will learn intercultural abilities and international business-problem solving, and the Amistad Program will continue its innovative path by generating new ways of collaboration, including a social responsibility dimension through the help and advisement to those small businesses that are in unequal conditions in respect to the larger ones in our communities,” he said.

## **Amigo Club announces Guanajuato Nights Date**

The Ashland Amigo Club has announced it will hold its Guanajuato Nights dinner/fundraiser on Saturday, Nov. 12, following two years of unprecedented challenges due to COVID-19. The pandemic kept the club from hosting the popular event in 2020 and 2021.

“We’ll also have someone in Guanajuato in June to join our Sister City’s celebrations of two summer festivals, just as we had done for 50 consecutive years until the pandemic got bad in 2020,” Club President Betzabe “Mina” Turner said. The City of Ashland usually leads the delegation to Guanajuato, including Amigo Club Liaison Señora Chela Tapp-Kocks.

The club will greet and entertain Guanajuato dignitaries and the city’s festival queen who will ride in the Fourth of July Parade sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce. It’s the time of year that the club holds a poetry recital, a Fourth of July party, and sells traditional Mexican paletas (fruit-flavored popsicles) at its booth among the more than 100 beside Lithia Park.

“We’re back and ready to go!” Turner said. “Of course, our plans could change if new Covid-19 variants forced the resumption of severe health restrictions.”

Turner’s annual report to the club membership said the board kept busy during the pandemic’s stringent restrictions, meeting regularly by video each month.

Among other activities, the club greeted longtime Guanajuato collaborator Dr. Martin Pantoja during a personal visit to Ashland; sought Ashland Parks and Recreation Department protection from restaurant-chair damage to the Guanajuato Mural on Calle Guanajuato; attended the SOU graduation of Isbyzaira Cristina Morales Fierro, a University of Guanajuato student who received a Master of Business Administration degree through an Amistad exchange arrangement between the two universities; and assisted the Virtual Museum of Sister Cities launched in 2020 by the University of Guanajuato.

The club held board elections in December for two-year terms ending on Dec. 31, 2022. Those elected are President Turner; President-elect Jay A. Tapp, Vice President Karen Grove, Treasurer Sean Van Ausdall; Secretary Lynn Lamoree; 501(C)(3)/ Grants Coordinator Kernan Turner; Guest Housing Coordinator Marina Kendig; Guanajuato Liaison Señora Chela Tapp-Kocks; and historian Catherine Van Ausdall.

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