

# A tale of two cities connected at the heart: Guanajuato & Ashland



Southern Oregon University President Rick Bailey and Provost Susan Walsh, along with Ashland Amigo Club members, welcomed a group of individuals from Guanajuato, Mexico Friday morning in the Guanajuato Room at SOU. The group will also take part in Ashland Chamber's Fourth of July parade Monday morning. Ashland.news photo by Holly Dillemath

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# Sister city group to celebrate Fourth here after two-year hiatus; SOU president to travel to Guanajuato in August

**By Holly Dillemoth, Ashland.news**

A small group visiting from Ashland's sister city Guanajuato, Mexico, will participate in Monday's Fourth of July parade for the first time since 2019.

The group, which includes the city of Guanajuato's 2022 "Queen" and one of the city's council members, has been visiting Ashland since last week. Southern Oregon University is serving as host for their traditional Independence Day visit to Ashland, including a visit to the Ashland City Band concert on Thursday. The Ashland Amigo Club serves as a "booster" club to both the city's and the university's relationship with Guanajuato. The club also welcomes those from Guanajuato who visit Ashland and coordinates their stay with host families, offers them meals, and plans fun activities for the visit.

"We were invited to the annual traditional SOU breakfast for the official visitors of Guanajuato during the Fourth of July week," said Graciela Tapp-Kocks, a professor emerita of Spanish at SOU and Guanajuato liaison for the Ashland Amigo Club, known simply as "Señora Chela."



"Señora Chela" in the Guanajuato Room at SOU. Ashland.news photo by Holly Dillemoth

"We make sure that they feel part of the city, not just the university," she said. "It's an international welcoming committee and we have to be aware of the customs and everything else."



Señora Chela started the more than 50-year sister city relationship between Ashland and Guanajuato. She is also professor emerita of Foreign Languages and Literature at Southern Oregon University, where she taught for many years.

“The town comes during this time, always on the Fourth of July,” Señora Chela said, “and representatives from the city like the Queen and City Council.”

This year’s Queen is [Cecilia Galindo Ayala](#), 20, daughter of Monica Ayala Ortega.

Guanajuato’s mayor chooses a young woman to be “Queen” each year for being known for good deeds. Ayala will be riding with her mother and her grandmother, Carmelita Ortega.

The Queen takes part in city government ceremonies in Guanajuato and in the towns around the city.



Guanajuato honorary Queen Cecilia Galindo Ayala stands and waves after being introduced at the Ashland City Band Concert Thursday at Butler Bandshell in Lithia Park. Ashland.news photo by Holly Dilemuth

Stefani “Fanny” Marlene Martinez Armendariz, a city councilmember from Guanajuato, will also be riding with the group on Monday, in addition to Guanajuato ambassadors Andrea Guardado Ramirez and Casandra Jimenez Verver y Vargas.

Through Señora Chela as a translator, Martinez Armendariz said her main interest is that she very much wants the city of Ashland to exchange culture, ideas, and professionalism with the people of Guanajuato.

The bond between Guanajuato and Ashland is strong, not just a partnership on paper but from the heart, she said, translated by Betzabe “Mina” Turner, president of the Ashland Amigo Club.

An estimated 900 to 1,000 students and professionals have participated in exchange programs between SOU and University of Guanajuato, according to Señora Chela and Ashland Amigo Club member Kernan Turner.

Turner said more than 80 marriages have emerged from the relationship between the two cities.

“This is a people-to-people program,” the city councilwoman said, through a translator. “It doesn’t just involve governments or directors or presidents of universities. It concentrates mainly on people, at all different levels.”

Mayor of Guanajuato Alejandro Navarro and his grown children traveled to the Rogue Valley following the Almeda Fire with firefighters from Guanajuato. The group helped local communities in the aftermath of the blaze that destroyed 2,500 homes and businesses.

Mina Turner recalls Navarro saying at the time, “When a sister is sick, you don’t ask permission, you just go.”

It’s that kind of commitment and friendship between the two cities that makes the relationship special, in addition to those who help keep the partnership moving forward.

“This woman has held it together for 53 years,” said Kernan Turner of Señora Chela.

Mina Turner echoed his sentiments, adding that Señora Chela is the “glue” that holds the partnership together.

“In Guanajuato, she is the Queen,” Kernan Turner said. “Guanajuato really understands what she’s done and they really love her.”

Señora Chela started the process of becoming a sister city in 1968 and the partnership began officially in 1969. She saw similarities between the two cities prior to the sister city partnership formation, among them, the similar mountains and cultural legacies and theater, according to the Ashland Amigo Club website.

“Ashland was looking for a sister city and I was able to in a year, being a professor here, to see the personality of the city, and I had been to Guanajuato and I noticed that personality,” Senora Chela said. “They had many similarities. They had the mountains ... they had the university, they had many artists, they had a lot of theater.”

Guanajuato hosts the International Cervantino Festival, which attracts artists from all over the world, including English and Russian ballets.

“Hundreds of thousands of people come every year in October to see the incredible dramas and music and orchestra and dance from all over the world,” Señora Chela said. “Denmark, Sweden, Israel, the United States. They’ve had the New York Philharmonic there.”

“It’s different than our festival that concentrates on Shakespeare,” she added. “But similar.”

Señora Chela said there’s a strong sense of community in both Ashland and Guanajuato, another element that they share.

“It’s a really wonderful sharing that we have,” Senora Chela said. “Sharing itself, of the city and the university, is as unique as the exchange is. The town-and-gown sharing is very unique.”

The past few years have been more difficult in terms of travel amid the COVID-19 pandemic, putting a hold on some of the activities between the two cities, especially their student exchanges.

“We’ve been idle for two and a half years and we are resurfacing,” Mina Turner said.

Amigos Club continued to hold monthly meetings via Zoom throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, despite having to postpone in-person events, exchange programs, and scholarships.

“Right now, we have two students already identified for the University of Guanajuato and one student from SOU.

“We are really excited to renew all our events,” she added, noting the return of “Guanajuato Nights,” an annual scholarship fundraiser scheduled for November at SOU.

Children and youths in Guanajuato grow up very aware of the partnership, so it goes to show how intertwined the sister city relationship is between Ashland and Guanajuato.

“Every time our people go down to Guanajuato, they’re just inundated with little, tiny kids who will say, ‘Ashland, Ashland.’”

Kernan Turner emphasized the energy that SOU President Rick Bailey has shown for the partnership early on in his time as president. Bailey will travel down to the university with a delegation from SOU in August, according to SOU Provost Susan Walsh.

“He’s really brought a lot of enthusiasm to it,” Kernan Turner said.

To learn more about the sister city partnership, go to [ashlandamigoclub.org/about-us/](https://ashlandamigoclub.org/about-us/).

*Did you participate in a student or professional exchange between SOU and the University of Guanajuato? Did you meet your significant other through the sister city partnership? Do you have stories related to the sister city that you’d like to share? Ashland.news would love to hear from you about it! Drop reporter Holly Dillemoth a line at [hollyd@ashland.news](mailto:hollyd@ashland.news) or DM her on Twitter at @HollyDillemoth. Your stories and name may appear in future stories about this partnership.*