



Day of Dead comes alive in book

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Ward Albro likes to say he always has the time of his life on Day of the Dead.

For 15 years, the San Antonio history professor has spent the colorful fall holiday in Oaxaca, one of the southernmost states in Mexico and among the poorest, most indigenous ones.

For more than a decade, photographer Denis Defibaugh has been drawn southward for those "magical days," too.

Their journeys — together and apart — have arrived in a new book, "The Day of the Dead: Día de los Muertos" (Texas Christian University Press, \$39.95), a 113-page photographic tribute to the people of Oaxaca and family observations of the much-misunderstood ritual.

Albro and Defibaugh's work joins a growing body of U.S. work on Día de los Muertos. Theirs is photo-heavy; accompanied by short essays by Albro, a Mexican history expert who long has taken groups of academics and students to Oaxaca.

Book Signing

- **What:** Book signing, 'The Day of the Dead: Día de los Muertos' by Denis Defibaugh and Ward S. Albro
- **When:** 3 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 27
- **Where:** Borders Books, Alamo Quarry
- **More information:** (210) 828-9496

Their book, which grew out of a photo exhibit called "Family Ties Do Not Die, The Day of the Dead in Oaxaca, Mexico," concentrates on the major idea they come away with each time they visit: In Oaxaca, death is all about family — not only one's *antepasados*, or "the dead of memory," but those left behind, people who believe their ancestors come back each year to visit them.

"Death does not end the family," Albro writes, "but strengthens the ties that hold families together."

The book's photos feature giant sand paintings, public and home altars (to which strangers are invited), gravesite celebrations, elaborate decorations at cemeteries, strolling bands, street theater and more.

While the idea of communing with ancestors is symbolic for some, the tributes run deep for the Zapotecs of Oaxaca.

"There's a powerful belief among the indigenous that these souls come back," says Albro, a UTSA lecturer.

While they don't believe *ánimas*, or souls, partake in the *ofrendas*, or offerings, on altars and gravesites, they believe loved ones "come back to enjoy the essence of the flowers, food and drink," he says.

Being at the grave site is critical. Long-distance observations are viewed with sadness and are believed to bring on catastrophe.

Día de los Muertos is the most important time of year in Oaxaca, bigger than Christmas and Easter combined. It and the days bookending it are regarded as days of obligation, the authors say.

Such observations, however, can be misconstrued. Some consider it "ancestor worship," the authors say.

"Before I started photographing Day of the Dead, I thought it was more about death," Defibaugh says. "I guess maybe I was a little uncomfortable. But after experiencing so much of the tradition, it's really a family-oriented time and a way for everyone to express their feeling about their *antepasados*," says the professor of photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

The Catholic Church, an early critic, incorporated such celebrations to draw and convert the indigenous. Nov. 1 is All Saints Day, honoring all saints, official and unofficial. Nov. 2 is All Souls Day, which honors the dead. In Mexico, Nov. 2 is an official national holiday.

In Oaxaca, however, celebrations can begin before those dates and end well after.

Decorating is a point of family pride. They save up for new clothes, new dishes and tableware. They buy fresh fruits, nuts, *mescal*, sugar skulls and *pan de muerto*. There's a "ritualistic exchange" of foods.

Mole, a labor-intensive, dark chocolate sauce served over chicken or turkey, is the season's dish, and cooks are competitive about their recipes.

The region's hard drink, *mescal*, is exchanged as well. Oaxacans believe it helps the digestion of spicy foods such as mole.

Markets are filled with fresh flowers as the book attests. Traditional marigolds, or *cempusuchil*, are surpassed by the magenta *cresta de gallo*, or coxcomb. Calla lilies, roses and gladiolas are used, too.

Though the book's photos might appear odd to the uninitiated, Defibaugh says Americans can learn from the Mexican indigenous tradition.

"American families are very segregated now," he says. "Careers are so important in this country, and families are separated very early on."

The book also documents more U.S.-like "Halloweenish" trends with photos of merchants selling masks of U.S. presidents, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, even 20th-century comedians Laurel and Hardy.

And more Mexican children are dressing up in costumes, yelling "Halloween" and asking for candy, Albro says. "They haven't learned to say, 'Trick or Treat' yet."

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