by

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Last year our site, the Inland Area Writing Project at UC Riverside, California, worked with the Palm Springs Desert Museum and the RIMS California Arts Project to produce an exhibit of student writing and art on the theme of Mesoamerica. Our goal was to use the museum as the rich resource it is to inspire student work and to then feature that work in an exhibit.

When people think of Palm Springs, many think of a playground of the rich, a place where actors such as William Holden, Kirk Douglas, George Montgomery and Frank Sinatra, all benefactors of the Palm Springs Desert Museum, have made their homes.

The wealthy and well-known, however, represent only a small fraction of the Coachella Valley population. Far more people work in service industries such as gardening and security. At one time the Native American tribe, the Cahuilla, were given rich land by an unaware government, but the distribution of land was unequal: some Cahuilla received land in what would become downtown Palm Springs, others received nearly worthless dry land in the open desert. Our teachers work with children from these families and children from other poor families. Many students are Latino who speak Spanish as their first language.

The Palm Springs Desert Museum is a museum dedicated to serving this population, not just the fabled rich and famous. Visit the museum and you will see lively groups of school children on tour. You will see a museum serving the larger population of the desert. You will see a museum eager to work with us on a project using the museum as a learning tool.

We chose the museum’s Mesoamerica collection as our focus for the year. The collection includes sculpture from ancient Mexican civilizations and paintings from the Mexican masters of this century. For one year, we worked with Coachella Valley teachers in workshops concentrating on the history, culture and art of Mesoamerica. The teachers considered ways students could interpret that culture in poetry, books and art. We prepared slides, videos and color Xeroxes so that teachers could take examples of Mesoamerican art into their classrooms. Our title, “Mitos, Imagenes E Idioma/Myths, Images and Language” suggested ways we thought students could interpret the material and reflect on it.

The task was formidable for the teachers and we underestimated how much we were asking of them. Most could not afford to bring their students to the museum itself to see the work and had to rely on the information we gave them. But the creativity of the teachers and their students was inspirational. We sent Xavier Cortez, the museum’s bilingual artist/educator, and a photographer to the classrooms to photograph the students at work. Many teachers had transformed their classrooms into a Mitos exhibition of their own. Aztec codices, miniature Mexican villages, and pyramids vied with jaguars and Olmec heads for space. Scroll books were spread out

Memorias

I desire to be back with mi abuelita again back in her arms like the baby I was . . .

I remember her arms warm and comforting like a hard cobija.

She would protect me like an angry mother dog when they hurt her babies.

She would never leave me alone for I’m part of her.

She would feed me like a bird feeding her chicks.

When I’d cry, in her arms she would hold me like a large cobija.

I desire to be back with mi abuelita again like the baby I was.

Carlos Torres
Palm Springs High School

Student Carlos Torres (second from left) with his family and teacher Svetlana Lazarov (left) at the exhibit opening.
everywhere. From this wealth we asked each teacher to bring in five examples of student work for the museum show.

A week before the exhibit opening, family members, principals and friends helped the teachers as they struggled with their student works. They juggled boxes of books and pyramids and tiny clay objects. They carefully brought in huge sheets of paper. I was both exhilarated and appalled; what had we done? What would we do with all this? What would it look like on May 23 when we had our opening for students, teachers and parents?

I arrived at the opening early to find a teacher and parent studying one piece of the student exhibit carefully. The parent looked at it, reached out gently to touch the glass, then gave a power salute. The museum photographer was there to take pictures and it was wonderful to see whole families pose in front of their children's work. Teachers came to me with tears of pride and wonder in their eyes. The exhibit was a rare affirmation of their efforts. A museum visitor wanted one student to copy his poem in his own handwriting and mail it to her. So many images I could give you of parents and children who came to the museum for the first time and beheld their child's work on the wall. It was a celebration. We called it Mitos 97, for we knew there would be a Mitos 98.