

Making Meaning from the Days of the Dead

Sharon Warwick

At the Denton, Texas campus of Winfree Academy Charter School, a self-paced alternative high school, teachers and students collaborated to create a Days of the Dead display. The Days of the Dead (*Los Días de los Muertos*) mark a Mexican tradition of celebrating and remembering loved ones who have passed away. The celebration traditionally takes place on the first and second of November when people decorate the graves of loved ones with flowers, skulls, candles, music, and food. Its recognition turned out to be very prophetic for my school last year.

Red Ribbon Week

The Days of the Dead occurred during Red Ribbon week, a time when students are reminded of the hazards of driving and the dangers of drugs. Our student council did a “Grim Reaper” activity in which they painted the face of one student every fifteen minutes to represent teenagers who have died from drugs and, auto accidents. The counselor for Courage, our campus substance rehabilitation program, had her students work with art students to create an *ofrenda* (a memorial display or altar) and paint papier-mâché skulls.

Teachers and students brought in pictures of loved ones who had died to add to the school *ofrenda*. The student council sponsor suggested we add pictures of celebrities who had died of overdoses. Students then shared the *pan de muerte*, the traditional sweet bread of the holiday, and everyone in



Celebrities who have died.



"Grim Reaper" display.

the school had a taste of the bread. The *ofrenda* was a great celebration of life and triumph over death.

A Second Ofrenda

Later that year, during the Christmas holidays, four of our students died in automobile accidents. Because students had the experience of creating earlier in the year, they naturally knew what they wanted to do. They created a school memorial in honor of their friends that we kept up for the rest of the school year.

Making a Commitment

The tragic deaths of their classmates motivated some students to graduate. Rather than place flowers at a crash site, students made a commitment

to graduate and took on additional assignments to finish the course load of their friends who had been killed so they could be graduates, too. As students pushed to fulfill their pledge, they left notes at the school memorial to encourage one another.

The parents of one student who had died visited the school to thank students for what they did for their son. Students, in turn, shared their memories of their friend with the parents. The school presented the young man's parents with a commemorative shadow box containing handmade cards and messages from graduating seniors, and a cap and gown that students purchased themselves.

"You've shown that you have something special in you to take the time,

your energy, and your money to do something for Kyle, who couldn't do it for himself," Bob Rothlisberger, the father of another student who died, told graduating seniors. "That's something that doesn't come from books."

The students' graduation photo was printed on the front page of the local newspaper, recognizing the success of these students and their dedication to the memories of their friends. 🌸

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students differentiate among a variety of historical and cultural contexts in terms of characteristics and purposes of works of art.

WEB LINK

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