



STATE OF NEBRASKA

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Governor

Latino American Commission
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HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH PROCLAIMED IN STATE COMMEMORATION AT CAPITOL

LINCOLN – The 6th Annual Hispanic Heritage Month State Commemoration took place on Friday, October 5, at the Capitol Building in Lincoln, Nebraska.

The Commemoration, hosted by the Nebraska Latino – American Commission (NLAC), began with a ceremony in the Capitol second floor Rotunda at 3:30 p.m. where traditional South American music played by Oscar Rios Pohirieth welcomed an audience of 200 people.

Governor Dave Heineman signed the Proclamation marking Sept. 15 to Oct. 15 as Hispanic Heritage Month in Nebraska. Opening Remarks were given by Jorge Ernesto Espejel Montes, Consul of Mexico in Omaha. First Lady of Nebraska Sally Ganem, six Nebraska students, two organizations and two local community leaders were honored at this year's Commemoration. A special award was given to First Lady Sally Ganem for her many years of service and contribution to education for all Nebraska students in all grade levels.

This year was the first Commemoration where award recipients were nominated by the public. The Humanitarian Award was given to Jose Soto, Vice President for Access/Equity/Diversity at Southeast Community College for his lifelong dedication to promoting the Latino community. After being nominated by his students, the Inspiration Award went to Dr. Sergio Wals, a political science and ethnic studies assistant professor at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln (UNL) for mentoring and raising awareness among issues affecting the Hispanic and immigrant community with his students. The Organization Award was granted to Justice for our Neighbors, a non-profit that provides free immigration legal services, education and advocacy to all immigrants. The Event Award went to the organizers of Festival Hispano with the City of Columbus for educating the public-at-large and promoting Hispanic heritage to thousands of people on a large scale.

“I was born in a hard-working family in Mexico City, with a diverse cultural heritage from different regions of Mexico,” said Dr. Sergio Wals to the audience. “My grandmother, the mother of my mother, was illiterate; she couldn't read or write. My grandfather, the father of my mother, could only finish third grade. My mother had to stop studying, too, so she could get a job and help feed her siblings from a very young age. She was a full-time working Mom. My father also had two to three jobs at a time, so my brother and I could have access to high quality education and to have a better life than theirs. This probably sounds familiar to most of you. You



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call it the American way. I think there is something more universal to it, but I still love and embrace the label. My story, though short, is already another story of this American dream, and I thank deeply the State of Nebraska for having welcomed me and for letting me live this dream among you," he said.

The Keynote Speaker was Dr. Juan N. Franco, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln (UNL), who emphasized the importance of an education, and the difficulties that can be encountered without it.

"I was born in the middle of nowhere and my father told me in order to make money I needed to get up early, work hard and find oil. Now this is Nebraska, so you may not find oil, but the first two still work," said Dr. Franco, who is originally from Texas.

The event concluded with the recognition of the winners of the Hispanic Heritage Month Essay Contest, which was open to students in grades 6 to 12 with the theme "My Local Champion," asking for students to write about an individual who has made them proud of their Hispanic heritage or inspired them with Hispanic culture. The essays were judged by a blind jury of 13 teachers, businessmen, and community leaders from across the state.

Out of 192 entries from 17 schools, the winners in the high school division were, from first through third place: Terrisita Klemm of Scottsbluff High School, Maria F. Hernandez Galeana of Omaha South Magnet High School and Kevin Tobias of Lexington High School.

All of the students attended the ceremony with their families and teachers. The first place winners read their essay to the audience while the "champion" from their essay stood beside them.

"Mrs. Sulu had done many things that were beyond the line of duty," said Klemm, of former Scottsbluff High School educator Patricia Sulu, who stood next her at the podium. "She helped the students in her class make culture another one of the huge things that you should be taught in more abundance than what was required at the time."

In the middle school division, the winners were, from first through third place: Kai Johnson of Beveridge Magnet Middle School in Omaha, Jessica Valora of Schuyler Middle School and Natasha Guico of Schuyler Middle School.

Kai Johnson wrote about mariachi instructor Marcos Mora in his first place winning essay.

"After a year, I was performing with his mariachi at various locations around Omaha and even other cities in Nebraska," said Johnson to the audience, with Mora standing beside him. "Ever since I joined, he has inspired me to open myself up to Hispanic heritage, people, and culture."

NLAC Director Dr. Arturo Spindola gave closing remarks.

Various performances were given by local artists including Sangre Azteca, Cecilia Sandoval and her daughter Frida, Alicia Hernandez and the brothers of Sigma Lambda Beta fraternity from UNL at a reception immediately following the ceremony in the Capitol



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Building's first floor café and courtyard. Latin-American food was served to more than 200 people including homemade desserts offered by the Multicultural Club of Northeast High School.

While children danced in brightly colored folklorico and mariachi costumes, Governor Heineman brought First Puppy Snickers to the café to mingle and play with the children.

"This was a widely attended and highly successful Hispanic Heritage Month State Commemoration," said Dr. Spindola. "We had students, educators and community leaders recognized from Lincoln, Omaha, Schuyler, Columbus, Lexington and Scottsbluff; we feel that Hispanics across the entire state of Nebraska was represented today."

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Note: Photos Available.