



Dave Heineman  
Governor

## STATE OF NEBRASKA

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### SEVENTH ANNUAL HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH STATE COMMEMORATION

LINCOLN – The 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Hispanic Heritage Month State Commemoration took place on Friday, October 4, at the Capitol Building in Lincoln, Neb.

The Commemoration, hosted by the Nebraska Latino American Commission (NLAC) and sponsored by McDonald's, Southeast Community College, U.S. Bank and Wells Fargo, began with a ceremony in the Capitol second floor Rotunda at 3:30 p.m. where instrumental Latin music performed by *Marcos y Sabor* of Omaha welcomed an audience of 200 people.

First Lady Sally Ganem presented the Proclamation signed by Governor Dave Heineman observing Sept. 15 to Oct. 15 as Hispanic Heritage Month in Nebraska. Carl Eskridge, Lincoln City Council Chair, gave the Welcome to the audience and Opening Remarks were provided by Roger Garcia, Executive Director of El Centro de las Americas in Lincoln. Seven Nebraska students, two organizations and two community leaders were honored at this year's Commemoration. NLAC Director Dr. Lazaro Spindola served as emcee.

This year was the second Commemoration where award recipients were nominated by the public. Yolanda Nuncio, Chair of the NLAC Board of Directors presented the awards to the four recipients. Hugo Arellano, Bilingual Hispanic Liaison of Lincoln Public Schools, was awarded the Humanitarian Award for his dedication to helping more than 500 people in the community with access to education and resources. Athena Ramos, a Program Coordinator at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, was honored with the Inspiration Award for her work in tobacco control initiatives among the Hispanic and immigrant community, which includes founding the *Latinas, Tabaco, y Cancer* community-based program in Omaha. The Organization Award was granted to the Multicultural Alliance of Hastings, a new cross-cultural organization serving as a resource and community center in Hastings. Among their services, they have offered meals and ESL classes to immigrants and refugees, collaboration on the Homeless Project and are currently working on a community mural project. The Event Award was given to El Centro de las Americas of Lincoln for their event, "*Dia de la Independencia Festival*" held in early September. The free family-friendly event brought the community together and promoted Hispanic heritage through music, food, and dance while providing educational resources to the public-at-large.

The Keynote Speaker was Dr. Sergio Wals, Assistant Professor in the Dept. of Political Science at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln.



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Dr. Wals told the audience about his background and experience as a Mexican immigrant coming to Nebraska to work at UNL and his reflections based on research of immigration and heritage in state's history.

"It is my duty to warn my fellow Americans that the social balance involving questions of race and ethnicity, the us versus them mentality, needs to be under constant reflection," he said.

A public performance by Latina ballerina Chloe Watson was presented after the Keynote speech on the Rotunda floor. Watson, of Colombian descent, performed a contemporary dance choreographed by Erin Alarcon, of Ecuadorian descent, who created the special piece to signify one's pride of their heritage. The performance and commitment of the dancers were courtesy of Ballet Nebraska, the state's professional dance company.

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 "How Latino Culture Strengthens My Community." The essays were judged by a blind jury of 13 teachers, businessmen, and community leaders from across the state, and winners selected by the Hispanic Heritage Month State Commemoration Planning Committee.

All of the winning students attended the ceremony with their families and teachers. The first place winners were invited to read their essay to the audience.

Out of over 250 entries, the winners in the high school division were, from first through third place: JohnMark Shields, Trevor McKeone and Jordyn Glaze, all of Lexington High School.

"Latino culture has enriched families all over the Lexington community by becoming examples for those around them," Shields read to the audience. "During one of my high school classes, we were talking about our home life and defining our dinner table. Almost all of the Hispanic students stated how they always come together as a family before eating. Hearing all of these great stories about eating with the whole family including grandparents sparked something in me and many other students. As simple an idea as it was, we began to see how much closer eating together could bring our families. This personally brought me to try and connect to my grandfather, who had distanced himself from our family. Most of us have not spoken to him in over ten years. Later that same year, I had the privilege of meeting with him for the very first time."

In the middle school division, the winners were, from first through third place: Ashley Roemmich of David City High School, Fatima Arroyo of Schuyler Middle School and Denisse Navarro-Perez of Brownell-Talbot School in Omaha, Neb.

"Latino culture strengthens my community in many ways. Some of these ways include hosting and participating in social events, participating in community service events, and providing valuable goods and services through jobs they have in the community. My community



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is a better place because of contributions made by Latino culture,” said Roemmich from her essay.

This year’s Overall Honorable Mention distinction went to Dalia Chavez of Norfolk Catholic Jr./Sr. High School of Norfolk, Neb. and Sharon Lin of New York City, New York.

Each essay is available in its entirety on the Commission website at [www.latinoac.nebraska.gov/](http://www.latinoac.nebraska.gov/).

The ceremony was closed by the First Lady who shared her own experiences growing up with diversity in Omaha. A reception immediately followed at the Capitol Building’s Dining Hall where a buffet of Latin food was served to guests.

“This year’s event was larger than last year’s and having representatives and students together under one roof is wonderful,” said NLAC Director Dr. Arturo Spindola. “We had students from Lexington, Schuyler, Norfolk, Omaha and David City, many who had never been to Lincoln before and community leaders from Hastings, Lincoln and Omaha all together meeting the First Lady and each other. We had performances by gifted Latino artists who donated their time today. This event is an accurate reflection of Hispanic Heritage Month.”

NLAC and the Hispanic Heritage Month State Commemoration Planning Committee are currently planning next year’s Commemoration.

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*Note: Photos Available.*