To Mourn and to Honor
The All Souls Procession enters its third decade of helping Tucsonans deal with death
by Margaret Regan

On a recent dark night, under the half-light of a waxing moon, gusty winds swept through Tucson.

At the Splinter Brothers and Sisters Warehouse studios, just east of the railroad tracks, a chain-link fence rattled in the breeze. Every once in a while, a train whistle wailed.

The weather had shifted, with October's balmy Indian summer suddenly giving way to a wintry chill. Ghostly November was coming. And a band of brave souls, wrapped up in sweaters and scarves, were outside creating homages to the dead.

Carol Bender was leaning over a giant puppet head of her late husband, David Rowe, dead since 2003. His papier-mâché likeness lay on the ground at her feet, his white hair curling onto his forehead over his big blue eyes.

"It doesn't really look like him," she said with a smile. But it was close enough. "He had curly, dark blonde hair and very blue eyes."

Carol was making a David mask to wear in the All Souls Procession, occurring this Sunday, Nov. 8. For the long, haunting march down Fourth Avenue and through downtown, Carol will have the puppet mounted on a backpack frame. David's head will tower over her own, teetering 12 feet in the air.

She's given him a lab coat—he was a scientist at the University of Arizona until his death from liver cancer at 53—and she herself will be hidden in the coat's white folds. Wearing his head and his work uniform, she'll march to mourn him, and to honor him.

"It feels like the right time," Carol said. "It took me a long time before I could talk about him without crying."

The late David Rowe was not the only loved one whose effigy was under construction in the crowded dirt-floor courtyard. A team from the Center for Biological Diversity was crafting an image of the late jaguar Macho B. The last known wild jaguar in the United States, Macho B was controversially euthanized by Arizona wildlife officials last March.

A collective of Peruvian artists, Entre Peruanos, was busily making condor headdresses for the flutists who will join their band of devil dancers this year.

A papier-mâché head of Glenda Ward stood poised on a platform, the handiwork of her daughter, Meli Engel. Glenda wore a crown on her head, and her nose was long and curving.

"My mom was pretty young, 62," said Meli, her own head snug in a gray woolen cap. "She passed away a few months ago. She was a queen," she added, nodding at the regal crown. "It was her way or the highway. But she cooked; she loved people, and people loved her."

Meli had an elaborate procession planned. Two friends will wear different Glenda heads, and still more friends will carry a banner painted with "personal hieroglyphics" about her life.

It might be hard for Meli to act out her grief in public at All Souls, she said, but "my friends will be with me. My girlfriend and her daughter and other friends will help."

Meli and company will have the support of a cast of thousands. Organizers estimated that last year, between those marching and those watching, 15,000 people thronged the All Souls Procession.

Started in 1990 by Susan Kay Johnson, an artist grieving over her father's death, the procession has become a magical Tucson tradition. Costumed marchers bearing handmade effigies of the dead walk to the rhythms of a panoply of music-makers, from Scottish bagpipers to Peruvian pipe players.

They might dress in skulls borrowed from the Mexican Día de los Muertos or Halloween, or, as the Peruvian collective Entre Peruanos does dress as the devils of Andean lore. Parents push costumed babies in strollers and
giant floats and memorial shrines go by on wheels, often with the help of the rolling-wheel experts at BICAS, the bicycle collective. Last year, a man and a woman carried a coffin representing the borderlands’ migrant dead.

Sometimes the revelers dance to the music, celebrating life; other times, they stumble along, overcome by grief.

“What you have here is a festival that addresses an archetypal human experience—death,” said Daniel Meyers, board president of Many Mouths One Stomach, the nonprofit that organizes the procession each year. “The body dies, and love continues. What do we do with all that love?”

During All Souls, mourners find plenty to do with that love. They can write a message to their lost loved one and place it in a giant urn that will be set afire at the end of the parade, their words wafting up in smoke to the heavens. Or they can have a photo of their mom or their cat or their favorite jaguar projected larger-than-life on building façades along the parade route.

“Some make a mask of the loved one, or wear a T-shirt printed with a loved one's picture, or carry signs evoking that person, calling them back to be present,” Meyers said. “It's a very powerful thing.”

A former Jungian analyst, Meyers sees the home-grown All Souls Procession as a ritual that engenders “deep community, deep healing and deep unity.”

Mourners in America sometimes have trouble finding an outlet for their grief, he said. "American culture has a bias against it. It expects you to be introspective for a week or two if your mother dies—the person who birthed you. The culture doesn't have a way to express that grief.”

Mourners are invited to “be as creative as possible. In a mass public ceremony, we're saying, 'Come and express yourself.' We invite all religions and ethnic groups.”

The grand finale is an explosion of talent. Most spectacularly, the fire dancers of Flam Chen soar through the air. And this year, Calexico may appear on the Franklin Flats stage west of Stone, for Flor de Muertos, the indie movie filmmaker Danny Vinik is making. (See the accompanying story.)

Like Nevada's Burning Man, Tucson’s All Souls is a modern, invented festival, but it has links to ancient rituals from Europe and Mexico. It’s named for the Catholic religious feast of All Souls, still celebrated by the church on Nov. 2, following All Saints on Nov. 1. But these Christian holy days honoring the dead—the saints are presumed to be in heaven, with the souls still struggling in purgatory and needing our prayers—were glommed on to earlier festivals.

In old Ireland, Samhain, the Celtic New Year, was celebrated on Nov. 1, marking the time when the veil separating the dead from the living grew thinner. On Samhain Eve, the dead could return to Earth, and bonfires were lit to guide their way. When Catholics turned up on the Emerald Isle, they tried to Christianize the old pagan feast by moving All Saints—the feast of All Hallows—from the spring to Nov. 1.

Oct. 31 became All Hallows Eve, and some of its traditions—costumes conjuring the dead and demons, lighted candles in carved turnips—were brought to a puzzled United States by Irish immigrants in the 19th century. Over time, the festival’s spiritual dimensions were lost, and it evolved into the American Halloween. But even the modern secular holiday has candles lighted in the darkness, and spirits traveling abroad.

Mexico's Day of the Dead goes back thousands of years as well. Indigenous peoples performed masked rituals commemorating the dead. As in Ireland, Catholic missionaries put a Christian stamp on older traditions. Día de los Muertos became associated with All Souls and evolved into "a remarkable blending of Catholic and native beliefs and observances," folklorist Jim Griffith has written.

Despite its ubiquitous skulls and skeletons, the Mexican holiday is a cheerful, even comical celebration of death as a part of life. Families picnic in the cemetery and cheerfully clean up the graves of their loved ones; they return by night carrying lighted candles. At home, they eat pan de muertos and sugared skulls and set up shrines ornamented with marigolds and photos of their dead.

The holiday has stretched into a days-long celebration, and can extend from Oct. 31 through Nov. 2. Nov. 1 is the day reserved for remembering lost children, los angelitos.

Mixed and meshed along the border, these forms have survived or been revitalized in some form in Tucson’s art All Souls. The jaguar Macho B will have a Mexican–style memorial shrine, rolled alongside his dancing jaguar body. His cloth body, incidentally, will be modeled on a Chinese dragon.

The Peruvian arts collective hopes to inject a dose of untouched Latin culture into the festivities.

“I felt the procession was not representing the Latin–American community,” explained Roberto Ojeda, one of the Peruvians making condor headdresses last week. So he got a little grant in 2008 and brought the flute rhythms of the Andes—and its folk devils—to Tucson’s streets.

Susan Kay Johnson lives in a church, literally.

Once a Baptist sanctuary in the Dunbar Spring neighborhood, just north of downtown, the church now houses Susan her husband and a collection of figurative sculptures and giant-head puppets
Propped up permanently in a corner is the head of one Eldon Danhausen, Susan's professor at the Art Institute of Chicago and a dear friend. "He was my art mentor, like my real father," she said, and when he died, she was grief-stricken. But she knew exactly what to do: make a sculptural likeness of his head and march him through the autumnal streets of Tucson.

After all, it was Johnson who created the All Souls Procession back in 1990.

"My father had died," she said one sunny afternoon in mid-October, before the weather turned. She sat in a patio outside the church, near a big dragon on wheels she hauled through the procession one year. "I wanted to honor him."

Johnson found that the typical American funeral that her father got in rural Illinois didn't begin to help her with the complicated feelings she had toward him.

"It was like living with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," she said. Cheerful one minute, raging the next, he was a sailor who had survived the bombing at Pearl Harbor. He was a tool and dye maker, and on the fateful day of Dec. 7, 1941, "he happened to be on shore, working in a shop." She believes the terror of that moment stayed with him. "He never talked about it once."

Like Daniel Meyers, Susan had studied Carl Jung.

"He traveled around the world and studied people's rituals," she said. "He thought it was important that we express ourselves."

She came up with the idea of performing a community ritual here in Tucson to express her sorrow.

"A death like that—mother, father, sibling—affects you deeply. I had unexpressed emotions," she explained. "I knew a little about Day of the Dead. I love the things Mexicans do around Day of the Dead; they're free in expressing themselves. But I didn't want to use it; I'm not Hispanic.

"I liked the idea of All Souls, celebrated around the world."

Susan had worked for Arizona Opera for four years, so she knew how to make costumes and masks. She had a studio downtown then, and she transformed the space with black cloth and lights.

"I made skeletons out of wire and rubber, masks and bones," and hung them all over the studio. She put hinges on the molds she uses to make her life-size figurative sculptures and opened them up to make double figures. Assorted other artists and friends, including singer To-Ree-Nee Wolf McArdle and musicians Daniel Moore and Mat Bevel, volunteered to dance and sing and play.

Outside, Susan erected an altar, lit by candles, and people looked through the studio windows to watch the performance inside.

"We started it on All Hallows' Eve and did it for three nights. We did the performance and then a procession, through the alley and down Congress Street to the Tucson Convention Center Leo Rich (Theater)." People wrote wishes on little paper boats, and set them a-sail in the fountains, a lit candle on each one.

"We tried to have lots of cultural traditions," she said.

Enough people saw the event, either peering into her studio or marching along Congress, that Susan was besieged with requests. "My mother died," someone would say. Or, "My dog died. Can't you help me?"

The next year, Susan got a grant from the old Tucson Arts District Partnership to teach mask-making and lantern-making. She turned the Armory Park stage into an altar, and more people flocked to her procession.

A Tucson tradition was born.

Little Angels procession was added a few years back, the night before the main march, for kids to memorialize grandmas who've gone to heaven and pets who've moved on to the big kennel in the sky. (A Little Angels shrine will be set up in the library plaza to honor children who have died.) In a little border cultural collision, the workshop on Stone Avenue where kids paint wings and make halos is just a few doors down from a Mexican piñata-maker. This time of year, the piñata-maker specializes in Celtic witches and skeletons and pumpkins for Halloween.

Jhon Sanders ran the Little Angels workshop for Many Mouths this year, cutting out several hundred tiny pairs of wings with the help of a team of volunteers. Two kids who painted a glittered set of wings were going in the procession as "animals who died. One of them's a frog angel."

"This gives parents an opportunity to present the idea of mortality," he said. "Discussions about death are missing from our culture."
The lone child working on her costume at the children's workshop one Tuesday night, Grace Thomas, age 4 1/2, decided against the angel wings. She hadn't heard anything about the death theme, and she politely insisted on going as a spider web. Her doting mom and a costume-design student from the UA were patiently helping her spin a web out of white fibers.

Despite her eclectic choice, Grace seemed to have already picked up the festival's ancestral theme. She wanted tiny spiders on the web she'd wear on her back, and first and foremost, she said, "I want a Mommy and Daddy spider."

Over at Splinter Brothers and Sisters, adults who'd suffered life sorrows that Grace had not were wrestling with their own demons. Or, in the case of two Mexican-American women, Marie Rosas and Lupe Lopez, their own snakes.

Marie was repairing a snake-haired Medusa head straight out of Greek mythology. She and Lupe have been in the procession five times—"It's very emotional. It's a good thing. It helps you let things go"—and last year, she wore the Medusa for the first time.

"It was for the men in my life, my father, my grandfather, my uncle," she said. But wind and rain whipped the procession, and marchers had trouble keeping their puppet heads aloft. Marie's was badly damaged, and she had to pull off the snakes.

Worse, it was a kind of torture to walk the mile and a half with the heavy structure—70 pounds and 13 feet high—on her back, blowing around in the wind. But she kept up the struggle, re-enacting in a sense what her father went through when he was dying. It made her feel all the closer to his suffering.

"I had to fight some battle," she said. "I was crying. My dad fought with cancer. I wanted to take the puppet off. But I had to keep going like he did, the hurt and the scare he went through."

Artist Matt Cotten, one of the masterminds behind Puppetworks, Tucson's puppetmaking collective, has been helping the grief-stricken of Tucson make their memorial masks for at least 10 years.

On the cold night last week when Carol Bender was making her David head, Matt wandered around the dirt yard at the Splinter studios. It was crowded with dozens of maskmakers, adults and kids alike. Buckets of clay and wet strips of papier-mâché littered the tables, and the puppets on the ground made walking difficult. A Weed and Seed grant helped pay for the materials—clay, paint, cloth, paper—but Many Mouths is struggling now to amass enough money to pay for all of All Souls.

Matt stopped to help Carol.

"It's top-heavy," he explained gently when she tried on the David head and frame for the first time and tried to keep her balance in the wind. "It takes some getting used to. You have to squat a little."

Matt has had losses of his own. Inside one of the Splinter sheds, leaning up against the wall, are giant puppet heads: His dad, Robert R. Cotten, who died at 89, and his maternal grandma, Rachel Marden Boyer, who died at 99 in 2003, "the same year my daughter Lucy was born."

Just like Carol, he couldn't bear to make or wear the masks of his beloved dead right away, when his grief was fresh. But he eventually celebrated their lives by striding in the procession with thousands of other mourners, the heads of his lost elders sailing above his own.

"What's so cool about the procession," he said, "is that it blurs the line between participants and audience. Anyone is welcome to come out on the road and become part of a ritual performance."

Margaret Regan dedicates this story to her mother, Mary G. Regan, who died July 9 at the age of 89. Nov. 5 would have been her 90th birthday.

All Souls Weekend Events

Thursday, Nov. 5

Amparo Sánchez with members of Calexico

9 p.m.
Solar Culture
31 E. Toole Ave.
$10
Friday, Nov. 6
Shooting Souls Photography Exhibition and Contest
Opening at 8 p.m.
Hotel Congress
311 E. Congress St.
Free
622–8848

Saturday, Nov. 7
Little Angels children's events
3 to 11 p.m.: Personal Altars Vigil
3 p.m.: Art Activities
4:30 p.m.: Story Performance
5 p.m.: Workshops
6 p.m.: Procession of Little Angels
6:45 p.m.: Little Angels Finale
7:30 p.m.: Spoken Word Soul Poetry
Jacomé Plaza
Joel D. Valdez Main Library
101 N. Stone Ave.
Free

Sunday, Nov. 8
All Souls Procession
5 p.m.: Gather outside Epic Café, Fourth Avenue and University Boulevard
(Advance registration for floats, groups, musical bands recommended at www.allsoulsprocession.org)
6 p.m.: Procession begins: Fourth Avenue to Congress Street to Stone Avenue to Franklin Docks
Grand Finale: Performances by Flam Chen, Community Spirit Group, Seven Pipers Bagpipe Society, Magpie Collective and Paul Bagley; burning of the great urn
Donations needed and welcome
www.allsoulsprocession.org
Calexico and filming of Flor de Muertos
with Amparo Sánchez, Mariachi Luz de Luna, Sergio Mendoza y La Orkesta, Salvador Duran and Molehill Orkestrah
8:30 p.m.
Rialto Theatre
318 E. Congress St
$30 general admission in advance; $32 day of; balcony sold out

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