

Faculty member and alum makes history exciting and relevant to UTPA students

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Sonia Hernández (BA '98, MA '01) proudly claims being born in the city with the largest killer bee. When people look at her bewildered, not aware of Hidalgo's famed gigantic sculpture of its mascot, she identifies the Rio Grande Valley city where she grew up in another way.

"I say I was born in the hometown of the King of the Accordion - Ramón Ayala," jokes the associate professor of history at The University of Texas-Pan American.



- Dr. Sonia Hernández

This Valley girl, who became an expert on U.S.-Mexico borderlands and Mexican-American history, was honored last year by The University of Texas System Board of Regents for her unique abilities to make history relevant and applicable for UT Pan American students. She was one of six UTPA faculty members who won one of the coveted Regents' Excellence in Teaching awards given to recognize their outstanding performance as educators.

She says the recognition, which provides a \$25,000 award, gave her a certain sense of legitimacy that she is actually "doing things right."

"History should be meaningful, thought-provoking and should instill a passion for critically analyzing the past not for the sake of 'learning dates' but to be able to address the problems of today in a compassionate, balanced and creative way to avoid repeating the past," she said. "When education is relevant to students and respects and celebrates their cultural heritage the learning journey will be much more enjoyable."

The birth of her passion for history

A first-generation Mexican American, Hernández said her passion for history began when she wanted to learn more about her own family's beginnings.

"It is a combination of wanting to know about my family history and understanding the reasons behind migration because I was the first one to be born on this side of the border," she said.

Her father, a farm hand who once worked on the King Ranch, and her mother, a seamstress who made quinceañera dresses and wedding gowns, grew up in rural areas with limited access to schools and gained only third grade educations. In the colonia where she lived with her six siblings, Hernández said she shared a room with her five sisters and didn't have access to an indoor bathroom until she was in high school.

"But I never saw it as 'poor me' - my parents take pride in the fact that they never got government aid. And it never affected the way which they instilled values and one of them was education," Hernández said.

She graduated from the original PSJA High School and earned both her BA in Spanish and her MA in history from UT Pan American. She describes her years at UTPA as "positive."

"You know if I had to do it over again ... I would not change anything," said Hernández, who went on to earn a Ph.D. in Latin American History from the University of Houston. "I have worked to make history exciting, relevant, and most importantly applicable to the real world. When you make students feel that they are part of the greater narrative that is U.S. history, they feel like they have a responsibility to that nation. I think that helps them become better citizens, better people in their respective communities and, ultimately, contribute to our nation."

Engaging students in research and their own history

Her research on the borderlands and Mexican American history informs her teaching and her teaching informs her research, she said.

"I teach students their history," said Hernández, who structures and centers her courses on hands-on research and a cooperative learning setting. "The greatest joy for me is hearing my students talk about how they discovered that their grandfathers were World War II or Vietnam vets,

braceros, or in the case of one student, that her father knew and marched alongside civil rights leader César Chávez."

She is a co-principal investigator of the [Community Historical Archeology Project with Schools \(CHAPS\)](#), which promotes the history, archeology and anthropology of the Valley in the form of innovative curriculum for college students as well as in area high schools. Hernández also played an important role in the development of UTPA's first interdisciplinary class - "Discovering the Rio Grande Valley: The Natural and Cultural History of South Texas" - and was part of the CHAPS faculty team from anthropology, biology, geology and history who taught it. Students in the class produced an extensive report on land, family, culture and the environment based on their research of an early Valley family that will be published soon as a book.

In the Porciones project she developed, Hernández has her undergraduate students examine deeds and land transfers at the Hidalgo County Courthouse and interview family and community members to trace the original Spanish land grant holders in the region. Students often used their own family's home as a starting point.

"What her students did was the kind of research done by professionals in a variety of fields including but not limited to real estate, archives, law offices, museums and oil companies. This is the kind of hands-on research that needs to take place in our history classes," wrote Dr. Russell Skowronek, UTPA professor of anthropology and history, in his letter to recommend Hernández for the Regents award. "When she talks about history, particularly of this region, she does so with great enthusiasm that is contagious."

When Maria Vallejo (BA '09) took Hernández's course in Mexican American History, she conducted research that dealt with education and the high dropout rates of Hispanics, particularly among migrant workers. She said Hernández encouraged her to conduct oral history interviews, one of which was with Vallejo's father.

"This was an eye-opening experience for me - I was able to connect my father's contributions as a migrant worker to the broader history of the United States," said Vallejo, who is now mentored by Hernández while in the master's program in history at UTPA.

A committed teacher, scholar and historian

Dr. Stephanie Alvarez, an assistant professor of Spanish and director of Mexican American Studies, said Hernández's commitment to students led her to devote countless hours of work to develop a new Mexican American Studies program at UTPA.

"She is dearly loved by her students because of her commitment to them and to expanding the production of knowledge about the Mexican American community," she said. "Her students often come by my office and speak about what they are learning and the research they are engaging in. For most, it is the first time in their lives that they have been presented the opportunity to study their rich history as Mexican Americans."

As the Department of History and Philosophy's graduate coordinator, Hernández has also encouraged many students to pursue graduate school and helped to create a collaborative Ph.D. program in history with the University of Houston.

Beyond her role as educator, Hernández's research interest in working women in the borderlands will result in a book to be published in Spring 2014.

Hernández said her ultimate responsibility is to train students to do work that matters and transform them into practicing historians.

"Practicing historians, in the broadest sense, not just as history teachers in our schools, but as critical thinkers, who can make sense of the past to be able to tackle community issues, shape policy, communicate well, and become our nation's future leaders," she said.