

CHAPS digs up new ways to explore Valley history and culture

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Claudia Tijerina (BA '02) says she can't wait to try out her new lesson plans focused on local history and culture with her students at Graciela Garcia Elementary School in Pharr.



Rio Grande Valley educators selected to participate in the Community Historical Archaeology Project's Workshop - "From Porciones to Colonias: Curriculum Innovation in the Rio Grande Valley" - held this June at The University of Texas-Pan American are front left to right Jose Hernandez, 7th grade social studies, Mary Hoge Middle School, Weslaco; Julie Bounous, 10th grade history, PSJA North High School, Pharr; Janine Bounous, 11th grade world history, Donna High School; and Claudia Tijerina, 2nd grade dual language, Graciela Garcia Elementary School, Pharr. Rear left to right are Yaneth Olesini, 8th grade social studies, Lincoln Middle School, McAllen; Ruby Aguilar, 5th grade science; Rio Hondo Intermediate School; Cynthia Elizondo, 3rd grade dual language, Graciela Garcia Elementary School, Pharr; Courtney Wai, 7th grade English, IDEA College Prep Mission; Lara Speights, 7th grade English, IDEA College Prep San Benito; and Anne Marie Huff, 7th grade history, IDEA College Prep San Juan. Missing from photo is Juanita Castillo, 3rd grade bilingual, Graciela Garcia Elementary School, Pharr.

The second grade dual language teacher just completed a two-week workshop conducted in June titled "From Porciones to Colonias: Curriculum Innovation in the Rio Grande Valley" presented by the faculty of the Community Historical Archaeology Project (CHAPS) program at The University of Texas-Pan American.

"We really don't know where we come from in the Valley. The kids, sometimes they are confused. They ask are we from there (Mexico) or are we from here (the United States). Having the background I got here at the workshop I know I can explain in a better way for the kids to understand why we say we are Hispanic," she said.

Tijerina was among 11 Rio Grande Valley teachers who were selected to participate in the two-week-long professional development training funded by an almost \$100,000 grant awarded to CHAPS by the [National Endowment for the Humanities \(NEH\)](#).

During the workshop, the teachers, from elementary to high school, were introduced to the University's Special Collections Library and the historical resources it has available to the community and received hands-on training with audio/visual equipment and oral history methods to better conduct interviews and prepare transcriptions so they can pass those techniques on to their students. They also learned more about Spanish colonial settlements and how to trace a land title's chain of history in a training session held at the Hidalgo County Courthouse.

The group also visited the Museum of South Texas History to learn about the region's natural and cultural landscape and the Palo Alto Battlefield where they worked directly with the National Park Service archaeologists and experienced three Mexican American War battle sites.

The workshop ended June 22 following a two-day session on curriculum development and lesson plan creation with regard to place-based learning.

"The teachers developed cross-curriculum material that covered subjects such as English language arts, science, social studies, history and math. Many of the lesson plans ensured that the students would incorporate technology as well," said Roseann Bacha-Garza, graduate research associate and CHAPS project coordinator.

The interdisciplinary workshop faculty included Dr. Russell Skowronek, professor of history and anthropology, an archaeologist and CHAPS co-director; Dr. Sonia Hernandez, assistant professor of history and CHAPS co-director; Dr. Margaret Dorsey, Border Studies Archive curator and assistant professor of anthropology; and Dr. Edna Alfaro, assistant professor of psychology.

"It was something different every day and the professors had us involved in things we had never done before. Every professor involved gave us so much information, which was practical and can be used every day," Tijerina said. "It was a lot of hard work but I liked the workshop and learned from it."

Tijerina's plans include having her students do a simple interview with their parents on how they lived as children, prepare a culture map about their family's traditions and participate in hands-on activities such as preparing dioramas and setting up and finding items to fill a classroom museum, all to help connect her students' culture to the local history.

"It's going to be hands on from day one to the end and that is what they love to do," she said.

The teachers will present their oral histories and lesson plans to other area educators at a free public conference later this year. The CHAPS faculty will also produce an edited volume that includes their scholarly essays and the teacher lesson plans.

Bacha-Garza said the enthusiasm the teachers displayed toward the development of this new curriculum will definitely ignite motivation within the K-12 student population to learn more about their own culture and history.

"The end goal is inspire the students to want to learn more and to want to play a part in preserving the Rio Grande Valley's cultural heritage for future generations," she said.

Initiated in 2009 at UTPA, CHAPS seeks to create archaeologically and historically literate citizens who are aware of their local cultural and natural history and its importance to the future economic development of the Rio Grande Valley. The NEH funding will support other CHAPS activities as well, including its interdisciplinary class for graduate and undergraduate students where they engage in research with UTPA faculty members in the areas of archaeology, anthropology, biology, geology and research to record histories of Valley properties and families. Their findings are then published and made available to the community. The students' first project initiated in Fall 2011 resulted in an extensive history compiled on the noted and longtime Edinburg family of Carrol Norquest Jr.

The NEH is an independent federal agency created in 1965 to promote excellence in the humanities and conveying the lessons of history to all Americans. It is one of the largest funders of humanities programs in the United States.