Shrines, Markers & Adornment in End of Life
Decorations express grief and honor the dead
This booklet is part of the Southwest Folklife Alliance Continuum Program – an ethnographic documentation of expressive practices in Southern Arizona communities as they relate to end of life.

Prepared by a cohort of citizen folklorists who researched everyday life in local multicultural communities during 2014-2015, this booklet outlines the role of adornment and decoration in ritual aspects of mourning and death.

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SouthwestFolklife.org

The SFA Continuum/End of Life project is supported by a grant from the Shaaron Kent Endowment Fund held at the Community Foundation for Southern Arizona. Additional support received from the Surdna Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Tucson Pima Arts Council and the Arizona Commission on the Arts.

ABOUT SOUTHWEST FOLKLIFE ALLIANCE
The Southwest Folklife Alliance (SFA) is an affiliate non-profit organization of the University of Arizona’s College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. The SFA is housed in the College’s Southwest Center, and the Public Folklorist at the Center serves as the SFA Executive Director. Our programs serve communities throughout the Border region corridor to maintain and preserve folklife practices in the southwest, support the economic development of heritage and folk artists and artisans, and build awareness of diverse folk and heritage practices.

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In Tucson, families hold dear those public markers and home altars that speak to our shared memories. The various ways we adorn these objects and places seem to help us face death and end of life artistically. As we assemble or care for these visible guideposts in how we honor our lives, sometimes over generations, we create decorative symbols of comfort supporting the grieving process and everyday life.
**Icons and Images**

Some of these objects are beloved public displays, like the iconic El Tiradito or Tucson Wishing Shrine, on a South Main lot in the Old Barrio. For close to one century, many versions of the tragic love-and-death-legend surrounding this Shrine have been told and elaborately embellished. No matter what its folklore, the 1930s wall of El Tiradito encloses a universally-recognized memorial to folklife entwined with faith. Its iron racks of candles ever lit (have you ever seen the Shrine without a candle burning?), with petitions and rosaries notched in the brick wall’s crevices, timelessly adorn this community altar of grief, hope and memory.

**Death Markers in the Desert**

There is extraordinary richness in Southern Arizona shrines, where many – weathered and decorated with flowers and statuary – rest on highways and hilltops. Jim Griffith’s entry about Roadside Memorials in the Continuum Journal speaks to the history of these special markers:
In 1783 Antonio Reyes, Bishop of Sonora, complained about the popular custom of placing a cross beside the road, wherever a traveler had been killed by the Apaches. This, he argued, led to profanation of the holy symbol of the cross, and was a chilling reminder of the stark realities of travel on the frontier. Over two centuries later, the crosses remain, although the automobile has replaced the Apaches as the major cause of roadside death.

The original purpose of the crosses was simple: they showed where someone died suddenly and without the preparation afforded by the Catholic Church, and passers-by could respond to their unspoken plea and pray for that person’s soul. …Today, not all the sudden death markers are crosses. I was recently shown a photograph of a Star of David marking a death site on Highway 87 near Sells. By the same token, the crosses need not be requests for prayers for the dead, but are simply commemorative monuments. Many are carefully tended by those left behind. I know death markers where the color of the artificial flowers placed on them changes with the seasons, or where special, seasonal decorations appear, such as ghosts or scarecrows in the fall…Whether they be invitations to prayer, acts in memory of loved ones, even reminders to both cyclists and motorists of the dangers of bike riding, these public memorials to tragedy and sudden death continue a long-standing tradition, and seem to be meaningful to an increasing number of people here in our desert.¹

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**HOME AND HIDDEN**

Our community’s shrines and altars also may be deeply personal tributes, some assembled by families in private backyards or in living room niches. Home altar making, a tradition with roots in ancient times, is an important aspect of spiritual memorial based in cultural expression:
The home is an enclosure, a necessary source of separation and self-definition, but the presence of the altar there brings a small, symbolic representation of the world into the house. Symbolically, it reverses the notion that the world is keeper of the house; rather, the house and its primary resident become keepers of the world.2

The practice of constructing a home altar is a form of family folk art, with the practice documented in European Catholic ethnic communities, as well as in the Americas. Holy things, family mementos, statuary and textiles all are carefully arranged, with candles lit to honor loved ones and to connect both faith and family memory:

My family collected memorial cards and crucifixes, prayer books, medals, relics, scapulars, as well as handkerchiefs and doilies edged in certain ways—These simple or handmade elements were the most meaningful and comforting of decoration for us, which we displayed on a living room credenza altar in times of grief. All of it conveyed to mourners and visitors at the time, through symbolic visual messages, the deepest feelings of sadness and hope in a time of loss.3

1 Griffith, Jim, Continuum Multicultural Practices Journal, page 17
2 Altars: Tradition and Innovation in a Women’s Art, Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, Santa Ana, CA January 3–February 22, 1985, Catalog Essay by Kay Turner
3 Surfaro-Spiegelman, Monica, 2014-2015 Continuum End of Life Report, page 4
On All Soul’s Day, November 2, Tohono O’odham “Li:mosañ” (per O’odham Kaj! LLC spelling and reference) tradition weaves tightly with O’odham Catholic practice in the form of wreaths, placed on the swept and cleaned graves of ancestors for the holy day. The wreaths may be purchased at the trading post (Gu Achi sells the wreaths year round) or from local wreath makers, but many are made by the families themselves. Thick satin ribbons and colorful crinoline mesh, or weather-protected plastic bows, are wrapped around Styrofoam or wire forms. Many families begin assembling the wreaths in the summer, decorating the ribbon-bedecked forms with colorful plastic or paper flowers. The wreaths are then placed with candles at the graves, which usually are marked with simple white crosses.

We visit our lost loved ones frequently. With respectful distance I have photographed this place of rest, in memory of those who have completed their journeys (see photo below). Knowing that this is where I will be laid to rest someday gives me peace because I will be with my family.

“For Tohono O’odham as well, paper flowers are important additions to altars as well as to the graves of loved ones on All Soul’s day. Both Yaqui and Tohono O’odham paper flowers may be embellished by dipping the edges of the petals in glue and then sprinkling them with metallic glitter.”
Stones do not die. They reflect permanency, keeping a timeless watch on the departed. In the Holocaust History Center adjacent to the Jewish History Museum on South Stone, a wing dedicated to the Holocaust survivors of Southern Arizona is a poignant and inspirational memorial to the over 200 Holocaust Survivors who over the years made Tucson and Southern Arizona their home. Nearby one wall of deceased survivor photos, there is a basket of rocks, and visitors are invited to place one as a symbolic offering for any of the victims. Flowers are not customary on graves in traditional Jewish cemeteries; instead, stones are placed as memorials for the deceased. In Judaism, stones have positive meanings: reflecting the foundation of an altar, sacred shrines and walls to Temples. There are many explanations for why stones are placed on graves, including to reflect a sense of solidity, more lasting than flowers, “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty like the flower of the field; grass withers and flowers fade” (Isaiah 40:6-7).
Beads of Courage

In many cultures, the wearing of beads is associated with courage, strength and longevity, and, in Tucson, beads also are symbolic of healing and protective powers in end of life.

More than a decade ago, the Beads of Courage program was created to help document and honor the journey children take when they are diagnosed with life-threatening illness. The program was founded by Tucson nurse, Jean Baruch, whose innovative arts-in-medicine supportive care pilot program at Phoenix Children’s Hospital in 2003 gave children, families and caregivers an outlet to express themselves in the most difficult times imaginable. The Beads of Courage program tells stories, using colorful beads as meaningful symbols of the many steps taken throughout the course of treatment. Courage beads give even the smallest children a voice in the universality of art, an outlet for creative expression during their treatment. Although some children are buried with their courage beads, in many families, the beads are retained as remembrance of their loved one. Glass beadmakers, many from Tucson, provide the over 100,000 Act of Courage beads that are sent out each year – powerful art for both glass bead artists and for the children and families involved in Beads of Courage programs.  

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8 Beads of Courage Arts-In-Medicine programs, 3230 N Dodge Blvd, Tucson 85716, BeadsofCourage.org
10 ibid, page 2
11 GhostBikes.org/Tucson
Ghost Bikes

Ghost Bikes are the international cycling community’s somber reminder of how vulnerable cyclists are killed by inattentive passing motorists. In Tucson, where these public memorials emerged in 2008, ghost bikes are both folk art and community placemaking, and an important part of the city’s cultural landscape.

According to folklorist Jack Santino, “public acts of memorialization are many and complex, having to do with sickness, belief, personal devotion, attempts to influence that which is beyond human control, and also a need to demonstrate to an audience…that one was there, albeit anonymously.”

Local businessman and bike commuter Ari Shapiro installed the first ghost bike in memory of a 14-year old, who had died after being hit by a drunk driver. Most of the early ghost bikes were created by members of the cycling community as memorials to fellow cyclists.

While decoration and adornment of ghost bikes vary with the individual, ghost bikes in recent years feature more decoration. For example, the ghost bike in honor of 49-year old Francisco “David” Galvez, who was struck by an unmarked police vehicle near the intersection of Fort Lowell Road and First Avenue in November 2014, was decorated by Galvez’s family. His ghost bike… features a locked shadow box, votive candles, flowers and memory ribbons tied around the wheels….

Painted stark white, with installations made by Bicycle Inter Community Art and Salvage (BICAS), these memorials are a strong local movement, intended as both art and traffic moderation cue for passing motorists. The ghost bikes reflect a collective expression of mourning and memorial in the community.
What local markers or shrines are most meaningful to you?

Did your family have cultural practices involving adornment and end of life? Write any recollections below.
Driving around Tucson, our eyes may catch a glimpse of a rosary or plastic flower adorning a local roadside marker; ribbons will flutter in the winds as we pass. Outside a local family’s home, we may spot a front garden altar layered with the textures and scents of treasured objects and candles. Unlike an undecorated granite headstone, these places are colorful and full of life. They are community cultural comforts— and powerful statements about our need for related symbolic adornment in end of life.

Unable are the loved to die, for love is immortality
– Emily Dickinson

PHOTO CREDITS

Front cover:

Inside front cover:
Author Jim Griffith, death marker, where seasonal decorations appear, Southwest Folklife Alliance

Opposite inside front cover:
Author Kevin Dooley, April 4, 2009, Descanso-Beltline HWY, AZ, flickr.com/photos/pagedool ey/3497402560

Pg 1:

Pg 2:
Author John Fowler, August 25, 2009, Roadside memorial, flickr.com/photos/snow peak/3872188202

Pg 3:
Powa ceremony, Southwest Folklife Alliance Continuum Journal, p. 8

Pg 4:
Prayer cards, Southwest Folklife Alliance Continuum photos

Pg 5:
Melissa T. Norris, Continuum Journal photo, p. 15

Pg 6:
Stones in cemetery, Southwest Folklife Alliance Continuum photos

Pg 7:
Author Roswell Park, March 29, 2011, Beads of Courage, flickr.com/photos/roswell park/5572638594

Pg 8:
Ghost bike for Constance Holden, Author Mr.TinDC, May 2, 2010: https://www.flickr.com/pho tos/mr_t_in_dc/4573505954

Inside back cover:
Author A. Davey, November 2, 2009, Pretty Plastic Posies, flickr.com/photos/adavey/4438636046