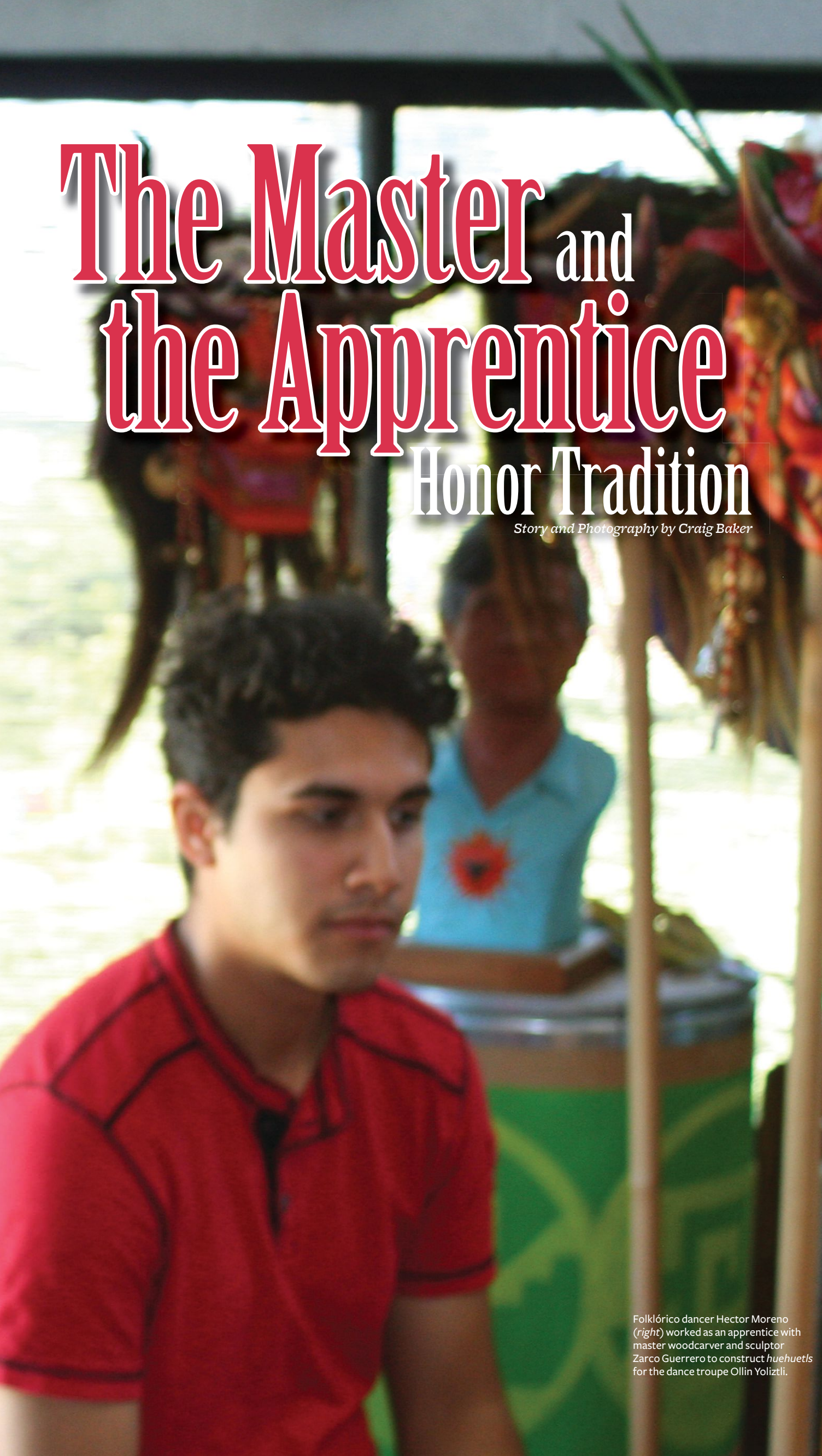




The Master and the Apprentice

Honor Tradition

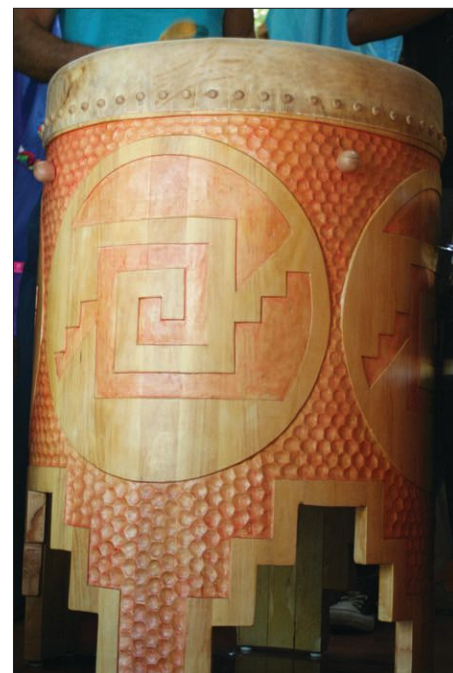
Story and Photography by Craig Baker



Folklórico dancer Hector Moreno (right) worked as an apprentice with master woodcarver and sculptor Zarco Guerrero to construct *huehuetls* for the dance troupe Ollin Yoliztli.

When Adolfo “Zarco” Guerrero moved to Mexico in 1972, it was with intentions of becoming a professional painter and sculptor. He studied at the De Aguila Bronze Foundry for two years, where he produced a series of 20 sculptures, though ultimately it was Mexico’s ancient mask-making tradition that captured his imagination.

“Masks are probably one of the most important cultural objects that we have,” says Guerrero. For the ancient indigenous peoples of what is today Mexico, wearing a ritual mask was a means of “assuming the power, the strength, the insight” of the animal, ancestor, or deity it represented. “If we put on a mask of a jaguar,” explains Guerrero, “we become symbolically and metaphorically endowed with the strength of the jaguar.”



The motif carved on Guerrero’s *huehuetls* is an homage to the Toltec symbol for balance, called the *ometeotl*, which, the artist says, also stands for *quetzalcoatl*, meaning both “feathered serpent” and “sacred knowledge” in the Nahuatl language. He explains that the Western understanding of the language often defines *Quetzalcoatl* as a deity.

He adopted the artistic philosophy of Cesar Chavez, which encouraged Latino artists “to bring dignity to our people through the arts.”



Guerrero “got swept up in the civil rights movement” and returned to Arizona in 1975. It was then that he founded the nonprofit arts organization Xicanindio Artes and under that umbrella started the Día de Los Muertos Festival in Phoenix. He adopted the artistic philosophy of Cesar Chavez, which encouraged Latino artists “to bring dignity to our people through the arts,” explains Guerrero, adding that “that’s what we did, and that’s what we’re still doing today.”

By continuing his tradition as a master woodcarver, mask maker, and performance artist in Mesa, Arizona (where he was born and raised), Guerrero says his aim is to pay homage to his indigenous roots: “When we put on the masks, we’re honoring our traditions and we’re dancing in the steps of our ancestors—and they’re dancing along with us.”

Guerrero is also doing his part to keep the Toltecayotl (name given by the Aztecs to the Toltec civilization that preceded them) traditions alive

among the next generation of artists—an effort for which he was honored last summer by the Southwest Folklife Alliance. The SFA is an affiliate nonprofit organization of the University of Arizona, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences; and a designated Folk Arts Partner of the Arizona Commission on the Arts with the support of the National Endowment of the Arts. Its mission is to “build more equitable and vibrant communities by celebrating the everyday expressions of culture, heritage, and diversity in the Greater Southwest.” One of its most well-known local events is the annual Tucson Meet Yourself Festival.

Along with master potter Ron Carlos of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, Tucson-based traditional Japanese dancer Mari Kaneta, and oral historian and author Felipe Molina from Marana, Guerrero was one of four winners of SFA’s first-annual Master-Apprentice Awards. Says SFA Executive Program Director Maribel Alvarez, “Zarco received the

Left, top to bottom: The obvious Asian influence in Guerrero’s work stems from his time spent studying the art of Noh mask making under artist Joshun Fukakusa in Japan.

In 1994, Guerrero was commissioned by the City of Phoenix to create an 8-foot tall statue of one of his heroes, civil rights leader Cesar Chavez. This smaller statue of Chavez stands in Guerrero’s studio today.

(left to right) Hector Moreno, Devaughn Gray, Zarco Guerrero, and Ryan Smith work and play in Guerrero’s Mesa studio.



Right, top to bottom: Zarco Guerrero has extended his woodworking abilities beyond making masks and into percussion by crafting his first two *huehuetls*, or traditional Aztec drums.

Guerrero is known primarily for his skills as an expert mask maker and wood carver.

So-called *calaca* masks are a staple at Guerrero's Phoenix Día de Los Muertos Festival.



award for his skill as a mask maker and carver, but really he also could have received it for being a dynamic cultural catalyst in Arizona.”

Guerrero works with a number of performance-art and dance groups across the state, providing masks and large-scale puppets for numerous plays and other types of performances, including the local Barrio Stories Project, which was presented earlier this year.

Alvarez says that the SFA Master-Apprentice Awards are the first of their kind in the state of Arizona, though more than 20 states in the U.S. have adopted similar programs since the 1980s to support local folk artists. “Master-Apprentice Awards are a staple of the folklife/folklore field in the country,” she says, adding that “it’s a pretty worthy mechanism of supporting heritage and traditional arts.”

Alvarez says that though SFA bestowed only four of the \$3000 grants to master-apprentice teams in 2015, this summer the goal is to hand out six such prizes, and to continue increasing that number until the group can fund 12–15 artists a year through the program. The deadline for applications for the 2016 awards is June 1. Awardees will be notified on June 30.

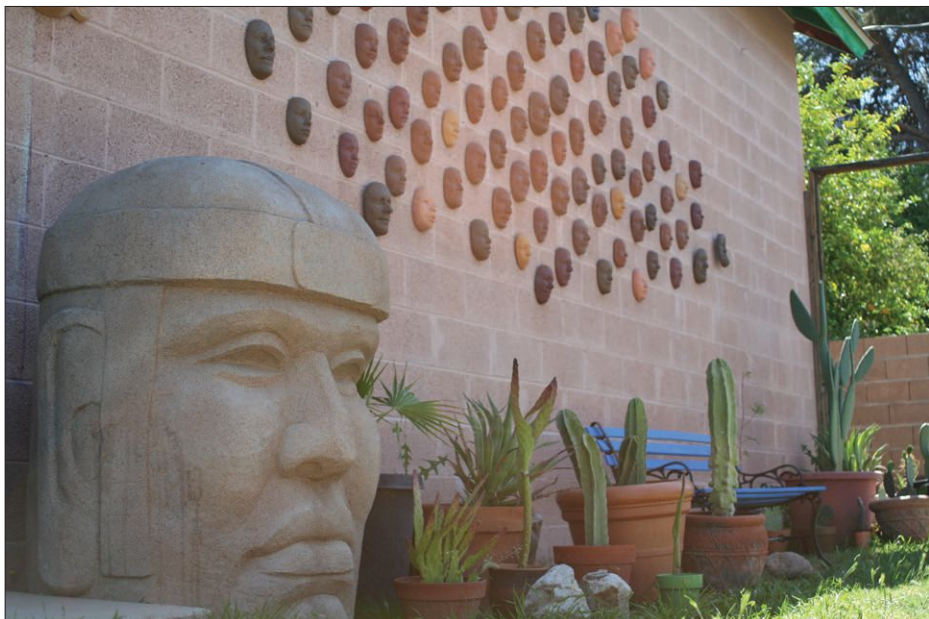
In the spirit of continuing to honor the ancient Mexican tradition, Guerrero has added a new specialty to his woodcarving repertoire—a style of drum known as the *huehuetl*, which is indigenous to Mexico. His apprentice, a young folklórico dancer named Hector Moreno, has been dancing in his mother’s dance company since he was three years old. Moreno says that before Guerrero made the troupe, Ollin Yoliztli (Nahuatl for “life and movement”), its first drum, the group had incorporated traditional Aztec dances into its performances but had access only to recorded music for accompaniment.

Guerrero says that Aztec dance has exploded in popularity among folklórico dance groups but that very few of them have the knowledge or resources needed to include real drums in their routines. “We have all of these folklórico dancers who are great,” Guerrero says, “but they don’t have the huehuetl.”

Moreno helped Guerrero with the fabrication of his first two huehuetls and has since learned to play the instrument and incorporate it into group performances. Still, Moreno admits that he’s not yet ready to take on drum

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Two Olmec heads, like this one, guard the entrance to Guerrero's studio.

MASTER AND APPRENTICE continued

making by himself. "I feel comfortable with Zarco by my side, leading me all the way," Moreno says of his hand in the crafting process. But onstage, Moreno says, "everything changed" once he was able to integrate an actual drum into performances. "It's almost like an alignment," he says. "When I'm playing, I still feel like I'm with [the dancers], dancing." And this is precisely what Guerrero was hoping for.

Guerrero says that there is a need for more specialized huehuetl craftsmen; although there are many such drums being made in Mexico, most are made by dancers who are not necessarily woodworkers or even percussionists, for that matter. "The idea is for them to make the drums themselves," says Guerrero of the small band of dancers/mask-and-drum makers that have gravitated toward his studio, "just so they know the work and the discipline and the patience

that goes into it, so that when they play it, and they carry it, and it's part of the ceremony, it means more to them." Guerrero insists that his apprentices' closeness to the art form will no doubt lead to the creation of increasingly better drums, since they are already accustomed to the performance requirements for the instrument.

To Zarco Guerrero, this process of bringing the Toltec traditions as close to their original roots as possible is one of "regaining our indigenous identity."

For more on Zarco Guerrero or his Phoenix Día de Los Muertos Festival, visit him online at zarkmask.com or diadelosmuertosphx.com. For more on SFA and its Master-Apprentice Awards Program, go to southwestfolklife.org.

DL

Craig Baker is a local freelance writer. Comments for publication should be addressed to letters@desertleaf.com.

C.A.T.S. FOREVER continued

many classes online through its main campus, Demic says he finally feels that the system is designed with enough flexibility to meet his needs as a student. He says that jumping from school straight into the pros didn't exactly leave a lot of space for furthering his education and that "just getting involved with life, there are other distractions" that prevented him from going back. Now that he is able to work through his remaining credits at his own pace, Demic expects he'll likely have his UA degree within the next couple of years.

Though each athlete's story is unique, a common thread among C.A.T.S. participants seems to be gratitude—for the guidance, for the

tuition payments and the flexibility, for the careful and tailored attention of C.A.T.S. representatives, and for the chance to cross a finish line that seemed to be getting only farther away with time.

"I'm very, very grateful, and ... I'm going to do everything I can after I graduate to make sure and give back to this program so that someone else can have the same opportunity I had," Durazo says of his experience.

For more information on the C.A.T.S. Forever program, visit wildcatclub.org.

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