

A Party for the Ages

A well-loved Birmingham festival celebrating Hispanic culture turns 15 this year.

BY JULIA SAYERS
PHOTOS BY TERESA ZÚÑIGA ODOM AND PROVIDED BY STYLE ADVERTISING

MOST QUINCEAÑERA CELEBRATIONS involve a princess-like dress, a sparkly tiara, and a tall tiered cake. However, the quinceañera celebration planned for Fiesta will be a little different.

Although no dresses are required, the 15th anniversary celebration of Fiesta, Alabama's largest festival for Hispanic culture and heritage, is sure to be a party for the ages—and all ages. This year's theme for the festival, to be held on September 30 in Linn Park, is "A Celebration of Generations." Just like a quinceañera celebrates a girl's coming of age, this year's festival will celebrate its anniversary with the community and the Fiesta family.

The talks for Fiesta began back in 2001 with members of the Hispanic Business Council of the Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce. The group wanted to create something that could raise scholarship money for Hispanic students while celebrating the diverse cultures within the Hispanic community in Alabama. They felt a festival would be the ideal way to showcase the many countries within Hispanic culture and have fun while raising funds. In 2002, Fiesta, Inc. was created as a non-profit, and the first festival was held. That first year, the group expected a crowd of 2,000-3,000 people. Instead, 7,000 people showed up.

Since then, the festival has continued to grow and has remained a viable resource to provide Hispanic students with scholarship money. In the last 14 years, Fiesta has awarded more than \$70,000 in scholarships to deserving students. This year, a total of \$6,500 was awarded to five recipients and three runners-up at an event for the reveal of a new festival logo back in April.

As preparations are underway for this year's festival, Fiesta board member and founder Teresa Zúñiga Odom, who has been an integral part of the festival and its growth, reflects on the last 15 years. Odom, who has documented the festival through photos each year, has been designating Fridays as "Fiesta Fridays," where she has been retelling—on her blog, southernhenora.com, and through



Clockwise from top: Each year, Fiesta has a lineup of bands that play at the festival. The bands at the 2016 festival got people dancing with a variety of instruments. Teresa Zúñiga Odom (left) and Vanessa Vargas (right) are board members of Fiesta.

Instagram—the story of each year of the festival.

"The consistent thing I've found is you have these friends you make over the years who keep coming back," Odom says. "The evolving part is there's more and more interest, and people want to know more about Hispanic culture—they want to know what makes them so family-oriented, or they want

know more about the food or music, so we try to make it different every year. For me, this is a sentimental journey this year because we have come a long way."

That long way involved getting a feel for what the community wanted and finding the best approach for scholarships. Except for two years in Hoover, the festival has always been held in Linn Park in downtown

Birmingham. It has featured everything from Mexican wrestling to a soap opera star emcee to a food-themed festival. A favorite activity, which will be back this year, is the McDonald's Fiesta Tour Annual Latin Grammy Experience, a traveling exhibit celebrating Latin music. You can learn about different cultures in Culture Village, where each Hispanic country represented



Clockwise from left: Girls in traditional dress at the 2015 festival. A couple dances at the 2016 festival. There are plenty of activities for children at Fiesta. You can expect a variety of delicious food at the festival.

Left to right: The festival stage is set up in the middle of Linn Park. Vendors sell items representative of different Hispanic countries.



has a display. Additional vendors allow festival attendees to try new foods and learn about traditions.

The festival's nominal entrance fee, \$8, goes toward the scholarship fund. Guests have the option to make an additional donation with their ticket purchase. In previous years, the non-profit gave the money to a particular college—UAB, Miles College, or Samford University—and had them distribute the funds based on merit. But this year, the board members decided to convene a group to decide the students that would receive it. They had an arts scholarship and an academic scholarship that more than 20 students applied for.

"The idea is that it's for everyone in the Hispanic community with a need," says Vanessa Vargas, Fiesta board member. "Most of these students are first generation Americans, so it's harder for them to apply for government assistance. It's organizations like this that can help your own people."

Odom echoes the sentiment: "A lot of times they don't know where to go to find scholarship money. If we can do something to make it easier, and they're aware and have participated in the festival and now they realize they can get a scholarship, how great is that? They keep coming back and keep participating by being a part of Fiesta."

Vargas, 27, has grown up as a part of the festival. Her father was part of the original group that planned the first festival.

"I've participated in the festival since I was a little kid," Vargas says. "We've seen Fiesta mature. It's our baby and it's an organization

that has started from scratch, so this year really is its quinceañera."

"This story right here tells it," Odom says, referring to Vargas. "You have someone who has grown up with it and been with it since the beginning and helped form it, so the part about a girl coming of age makes sense."

In addition to the quinceañera theme this year, the Fiesta organization is also hosting a quinceañera for eight local girls whose families could not afford to throw them traditional quinceañeras.

"It's another way to give back to the community and show them we're here for them," Vargas says.

The festival isn't only for Hispanics, though—it is intended to introduce other cultures and communities to the Hispanic community.

"For me, being a young person and a millennial, I love diversity," Vargas says. "I've grown up over two cultures—I'm Colombian, but I was raised here. It's all about diversity and bringing together the Hispanic and American communities."

One of the greatest things about Fiesta is its ability to bring all cultures together—in a fun, family-friendly atmosphere.

"When you look at Birmingham in general, we thought what better place to have a festival that showcases Hispanic culture than the birthplace of Civil Rights?" Odom says. "At any given time during the festival, you can look out and see all these different cultures represented. It's not just Hispanic cultures that go. It's a festival to showcase and educate and let people have fun while

doing it. And if you have fun, you're going to remember it."

For 15 years, people have remembered the festival and what makes it so special and unique. Year after year, support for the festival has grown, even from past scholarship recipients. This year, one such recipient called Odom to ask how she could contribute. Odom, Vargas, and other Fiesta board members have made a mark on the Birmingham community. And as Birmingham continues to evolve, the festival reflects the acceptance and tolerance our city continues to work toward.

"Any time you see a festival like this you hope it's going to last a long time," Odom says. "For us to be at year 15 is incredible. It seems to me that the community—both Hispanic and Anglo—really enjoy it. It's something that I think is engrained in a lot of people, and they would miss it if it were gone. I want us to continue the scholarships and continue getting more young people involved in the event and planning of it. They have such great ideas and they know the community so well that it's going to continue evolving."

"I think it's showing how Birmingham is evolving and becoming more diverse," Vargas says. "Every year we see new faces from the Anglo community. This is the South, so I think it's great knowing they're interested. I love it." ■

Details

Fiesta | Linn Park | September 30 | 12 p.m.-8 p.m. | fiestabham.com



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