Native American Basket Weavers Maintain Tradition

Native American traditions are alive and well at Mission San Juan Capistrano thanks to a small group of Native Americans who have maintained — and some might say “perfected” — the art of basket weaving.

Teeter Marie Olivares Romero, Ellen Sue Olivares and Kim Inez Olivares Leone lead the teaching of the art of basket weaving every first and third Wednesday at the Mission. It has become an integral part of the Mission’s efforts to preserve the history and traditional values of the area.

Teeter has been basket weaving for over 35 years, an idea she came up with during San Juan’s celebration of the Mission’s 200-year anniversary in 1976.

“When we reached out in the 70’s, I was a docent,” Teeter said. “I come from the older generation of docents. The 200-year anniversary triggered it in us. I started basket weaving and I liked it, I kept it up because I got so interested in the culture.”

Teeter soon learned that basket weaving involved an intricate process. She learned about the materials that were needed, and it took more than a trip to the store to gather them.

“You have to find a place to gather, so we’d go to the river for materials but it was all concrete in the 70’s,” Teeter said. “We have to go into the wild for materials, like juniper and yucca once you have the materials you have to dry ‘em, then size ‘em, then cut ‘em. It takes a long time from beginning to end.”

Ellen Sue says her intent when making the baskets is “to capture the culture of our elders and teach other generations.” Kim says her 10-year-old granddaughter is “insanely excited” all of it and in that excitement it is rewarding to know I’m showing two generations.”

It is indeed a family tradition that Teeter says was meant to be.

“I’ve lived all my life two blocks away from the Mission,” she said. “Sometimes you’re meant to be in one spot. I knew if I married someone from here, I’d never leave.”

Teeter met and married the late Bill Romero, whose father worked at the Mission and knew how to make adobe.

“The Mission, for our kids, for our family, has always been our playground.”

Mission Clubhouse: A Place for Inspired Learning

Mission Clubhouse, a place for inspired learning opened on Nov. 6 with an appreciative audience and the volunteer Native American basket weavers on hand. The weavers, many of whom are connected to the founding of the Mission, were the first to participate at the Mission Clubhouse opening, weaving a giant demonstration basket built from a concept similar to one in Washington D.C.’s National Museum of the American Indian.

The Mission Clubhouse has other free hands-on learning stations:

-Spinning the Wheel of Mission Jobs, where kids will discover what they might not have known all they could be in the Mission community. Everyone individual performed jobs or chores to help keep the Mission running. Padres and soldiers taught the Native American Apache tribe farming, ranching, candle making, leather making and many more jobs.

-Building roman arches with miniature blocks. Arches are a main part of Mission history and can be seen along the corridors, within the Great Stone Church, and at the bell wall.

-Children receive a free Mission Clubhouse member card and get to fill in their mission job after visiting the hands-on activities stations.

“We want to connect children to the past, to the traditions that contributed to the building of this Mission, and the traditions that continue to stay strong today,” said Michelle Lawrence, the executive director of Mission San Juan Capistrano. “We are proud of our relationship with our volunteers who wanted them to be the first to see how we are aiming to inspire kids to care about their traditions.”

“As a mother, I know kids learn a lot in ways that are different. I know they can make just about anything happen if we have the community’s support. The project was funded by private donations and for that the kids will be grateful.”