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OPINION COLUMNIST; S.A.'s historical big picture is emerging

Elaine Ayala

Over the years, San Antonians have come up with a lot of reasons for the popularity of the annual Martin Luther King Jr. March, the largest of its kind in the country, which will draw an estimated 200,000 people today.

Those same reasons are mentioned for the tone of the city's ever-expansive Fiesta. Like MLK, it brings vastly different people together in spite of the city's segregation and class divisions.

Those behind a new initiative by Northwest Vista College and the American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions believe that this San Antonio something - call it interdependence, cooperation, cohesion, tolerance or intermarriage - was part of its beginnings and has yet to be documented sufficiently, if at all.

The Academia & Community Partnership also is built on the idea that San Antonio has to learn its history beyond the Alamo, where it seems to begin and end, to everyone's detriment. Making the bigger story more accurate and inclusive is especially important as the city nears its 300th anniversary in 2018.

Through several pursuits on the academic and community level, the partnership will seek to unearth the roots of San Antonio's multicultural history by beginning with its indigenous people.

Signed as a memo of understanding, it will establish an archaeological field school at the Land Heritage Institute along the Medina River 15 miles south of downtown.

It's a rich archaeological site that has begged for more study since Texas A&M University scholar Alston Thoms was instrumental in documenting the significance of the ancient Indian encampment. It's regarded as a living land museum exhibiting all the cultures that shaped the state of Texas.

It also was where the failed Applewhite Reservoir project would have flushed out 10,000 years of history.

Courses will be built around the field school, giving students an opportunity to participate in digs and prepare for research at the university and graduate level. It will result in a class called "Winter on the Medina" by January 2017. It's easily the most exciting of the project's components.

Concurrently, the initiative will archive documents and photos and potentially collect artifacts from families in Somerset, Von Ormy, Losoya and other communities. It's where early San Antonians retreated during conflict and then settled. The project regards such areas as key to telling a more inclusive story about San Antonio.

Already, the co-founders of the initiative have visited Somerset and Von Ormy to begin a "history harvest," said Northwest Vista adjunct professor Rudy De La Cruz, who with Ramón Vásquez, executive director of the American Indians in Texas, co-founded the project.

It has been endorsed by the Witte Museum; the Spanish Archives of Bexar County; Art Martinez de Vara, former mayor of Von Ormy and president of its historical society; and Thoms. Several Northwest Vista professors are behind the project, as are the college's president, Ric Baser, and Amy Whitworth, its vice president of academic success. Our Lady of the Lake University has been tapped as well, De La Cruz said.

In November, he and Vásquez joined descendants of San Antonio's early families, including those of Francisco Antonio Ruiz, mayor of San Antonio during the Alamo battle; and Blas Herrera, a soldier-scout considered the "Paul Revere" of the Texas Revolution.
It isn't the first time the American Indians in Texas group has partnered with academia, but it's a project it sought out for the city's tricentennial. “We want to be part of telling our story as American Indians and the first Tejanos, the first Catholics and the first cowboys of the area,” Vasquez said. “It's a gift to San Antonio for its 300th anniversary.”

“Many Mexican-Americans in South Texas don't know they have native culture in their ancestry,” De La Cruz added. “We always hear about what happened at the Alamo, but we never hear about the native populations who were already here and how many of them had to assimilate into the Mexican culture to survive.”

“We had conflict, yes, but we also needed each other to survive. That culture still survives in San Antonio,” he says.

The initiative will strive to tell “the oneness of our story” and “be an example to the nation of what a real multicultural community looks like,” De La Cruz said.

eayala@express-news.net

Twitter: @ElaineAyala