

Native American Heritage Month events growing

Native American Heritage Month will be marked in San Antonio with myriad events — from powwows and policy discussions to musical tributes and memorial vigils.

Each gathering, one way or another, will commemorate indigenous peoples' contributions to history, especially Alamo City history.

Though indigenous people are often regarded as virtually invisible — making up only about 1.5 percent of the city's population in the 2010 Census — local leaders said the November calendar of events is growing right along with those who identify as having American Indian ancestry.

From 2000 to 2010 in San Antonio, their overall numbers jumped by almost a third, to 20,137.

American Indians who self-identified as Hispanic or Latino grew even more — by 46 percent, to 13,654. As of 2010, more than two-thirds of San Antonio's American Indians identified as Hispanic or Latino, outpacing that growth in the nation as a whole (22.8 percent) and in Texas (43.5 percent).

With the city's newfound focus on its Spanish missions in pursuit of UNESCO World Heritage Site status, native groups have received more attention, and their leaders say it's about time.

“The Native Americans were the first families of San Antonio,” said Cindy Brown, a member of the Native American Church.

“You don't see the Indians,” Brown said, adding, “A lot of people don't see the missions as reservations either, but they were.”



The five colonial missions, in fact, remain a sensitive topic, as they are viewed as sacred ground.

“People don't realize the whole mission was a burial ground,” said Ramon Vasquez, executive director of the nonprofit American Indians of Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions (AIT-SCM).

“Our camposantos (Spanish for cemeteries) have not been given the same respect ... (as) others across the country,” he said. “Native groups are still at battle, especially in Texas.”

Epifanio “Danny” Hernandez, founder and president of the nonprofit San Antonio River Missions Indian Descendants, said access to the missions remains an issue. He'll serve on the advisory committee working for the UNESCO designation.

“We were removed not once but twice,” Hernandez said, referring to descendants of mission Indians who lived in and around the South Side missions “up until the 1930s.”

The Mission Descendants group said scholars estimate that 15,000 native people lived in the missions of San Antonio in the mid-1700s.

“I really believe our ancestors are calling us to come back,” Hernandez said, especially for powwows and family reunions.

Hernandez also hopes more Hispanics of American Indian ancestry step forward to embrace their heritage, saying many of the missions' Tejano-Indian families still live in mission neighborhoods. Vasquez noted that the San Antonio metropolitan area is home to one of the largest concentrations of American Indians in the United States.

Hernandez's organization will start off the local events today with the Indigenous Peace Gathering at the Villita Assembly Building to celebrate the Indians who built the missions.

St. Mary's University and Fort Sam Houston will host powwows Wednesday and Nov. 17, and Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph will stage several events, including a Nov. 15 performance by Native American flutist Vickie Ravenhawk, described as a Grammy winner and retired Army master sergeant.

AIT-SCM will hold its 13th annual vigil the day after Thanksgiving at Mission San Juan to commemorate the 1999 re-interment there of about 100 human remains after a long argument with the Archdiocese of San Antonio, Vasquez said.

Then on Nov. 28, the National Urban Indian Family Coalition will meet in San Antonio for a roundtable discussion designed to help shape federal policy affecting urban Indians.

Native people

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