WHITTIER UNION
HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

To Achieve and Maintain Excellence... NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Nov. 16, 2026 **CONTACT:** Andrea Garcia **PHONE:** 909-447-2403

Whittier Union Community Unites During La Serna High Día de los Muertos Celebration

WHITTIER – Meticulously detailed and colorful calavera skeletons, sugar skulls, and giant displays decorated with photos of loved ones who have passed on greeted the La Serna High School community, many dressed as traditional catrinas, as they gathered for the school's fifth annual Día de los Muertos celebration on Nov. 4.

The celebration featured dance performances, food, art, music, literature, face painting, and other Día de los Muertos traditions, and culminated in a remembrance walk that saw Lancer students and community members bringing orange marigolds, luminaries, and trees of life to place on a display. Presented by the La Serna Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) and the school's Puente Program, this year's event was its biggest celebration yet, with student groups, local vendors, and community members uniting for an evening filled with joy and memories.

"We wanted to bring something cultural to the school and highlight something that would bring our community together, something everyone could participate in," said La Serna Puente Counselor Elba Solis, who coordinated the event with student and staff coordinator Lily Perez. "Dia de los Muertos gives us an opportunity to explore our culture and identity while building connections, belonging, and understanding within the school community."

Puente students were all smiles as they applied traditional face paint on their classmates in the morning and to the community during the evening event, including powder white cheeks, blackened eyes, and squiggly skeleton mouths, all in the traditional catrina style.

"It's really hard to do, but we practiced on ourselves in the morning. It's so fun," La Serna senior Geraldine Ruiz said. "I love the Puente program because it helps us prepare for college and life after graduation. My favorite activity is helping organize the Senior Banquet at the end of the year."

La Serna student groups were everywhere, offering pan dulce, baked treats, and esquites. The boys volleyball team ran a "dirty" soda bar, offering soda mixed with flavored syrups, while the La Serna dance team sold Dragon's Breath – sugary cereal dipped in liquid nitrogen that mimics a dragon spewing smoke when eaten. La Serna's Lunch Club raised money by selling hot dog combos and homemade sugar skull cookies.

"The Lunch Club helps to foster relationships between the school's special education and general education students. It's all about inclusion," La Serna special education teacher and Lunch Club advisor Ann Mary Gilbert said. "We have our whole team here, our parent volunteers, students, and speech therapists. Everyone wants to be part of the celebration."

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The celebration included performances from several local dance academies, including De Luna Dance Academy in Whittier, a combination dance performance by La Serna Dance Production and Imperial Dance Studio, and Ballet Folklorico Mi Herencia, which presented dances from various regions of Mexico, highlighting the ways different regions interpret their culture. Coordinated by Leticia Cervantes-Lopez, the parent group Muñecas performed a cultural dance and led the Remembrance Walk.

The day began with La Serna students gathering for a presentation by Esparza and her son, Alec, who is a Whittier-based artist. Ofelia served as a cultural advisor on the Pixar/Disney animated classic, "Coco," along with her daughter Rossana Esparza, and in 2018 was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship by the National Endowment of the Arts.

The Esparzas talked to La Serna students about the history of Día de los Muertos and its traditions, and explained why family members place photographs of the deceased on a display. Inspired by the Esparzas, La Serna students put their own photos of family members in frames they decorated, then placed them on a display built by Orlando Cernas, owner of Papa Churros, in the La Serna main quad.

"Día de los Muertos is celebrated because we have an obligation to continue remembering our loved ones. It's a cultural and spiritual tradition and we must never forget," Alec Esparza said. "I have seven children, and four of them never met my father but they have learned much about him during our celebrations and have passed that knowledge to their children. This is why we celebrate Día de los Muertos."

The celebration included numerous traditional displays, as well as local vendors and authors selling clothing, jewelry, books, sugar skulls, and other calavera-themed knickknacks. Other groups participating included Hillview Middle School Puente students who hosted a candle making activity, and the Río Hondo College Puente Program, which offered loteria games.

"La Serna's Día de los Muertos celebration is a defining event for the Whittier community," Superintendent Dr. Monica Oviedo said. "We all have loved ones that are dear to our hearts, and to have the opportunity to share your emotions and memories with our friends, family, and classmates is priceless. Thank you to the La Serna PTSA, the Puente Program, the Esparzas, our local vendors and education partners and, most importantly, our families for being part of this special event."

PHOTO CAPTIONS

WUHSD_CELEBRATION1: Traditional cultural dances were on display during La Serna High School's fifth annual Día de los Muertos celebration on Nov. 4, which brought the Lancer community together for an evening of music, art, food, and meaningful traditions.

WUHSD_CELEBRATION2: La Serna students and community members take part in a remembrance walk during the Día de los Muertos celebration on Nov. 4, placing orange marigolds and trees of life on a special display to honor loved ones who have passed away.

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