**South Texas College**

December 2019 News Center: Trinidad Gonzales feature

**Making Racism *History*: STC Professor Trinidad Gonzales**

“You're not born a racist when you come out of the womb,” says South Texas College history professor Trinidad Gonzales, whose life’s work has been to overcome hatred through education and inclusive history. “Once you understand race and racism as being built on an idea that has been created, then you can undo that. You can unpack that and say, ‘We don't have to accept that idea.’”

Gonzales is part of an extraordinary team of professors that recently won the prestigious Herbert Feis Award for Public History from the American Historical Association for its work on Refusing to Forget (RTF), a nonprofit that tells the history of state-sanctioned killings of Mexicans and Mexican Americans during the 1910s. It is estimated that several thousand lives were lost, yet until RTF, this history was not widely known.

Gonzales has a personal connection to the tragedy that fuels his passion for bringing this history to light: both his great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather were victims of the racial violence by Texas Rangers.

Growing up, he heard about these killings from his parents, but he never heard the term *Matanza* in reference to that period of history. The term refers to the killing of an estimated 300 Mexicans and Mexican Americans from July to November of 1915 in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, the epicenter of this horrific history.

While working on his dissertation on intra-ethnic identity and the history of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, he had a “chilling moment.” His research uncovered an editorial from 1929 denouncing a Hidalgo County Sheriff for his involvement in La Matanza.

“He started listing names,” recalls Gonzales. “I went down to the next paragraph and went, ‘wait a minute—did he just say my family's name?’ And it was there in black and white.” Reconfirming that members of his family had been victims in the massacre was a moment that changed the course of his research and his life. He knew there were unknown histories that needed to find a voice.

His commitment to revealing this lost history took a turn in 2013, after Gonzales had been a professor at STC for many years. The 100-year anniversary of La Matanza was coming up, and he was invited to join RTF and present this history to the public.

“We did not want the misrepresentation of that history, which is basically criminalizing the victims and saying they are at fault for why they got killed,” says Gonzales. It was time to get the word out and pay respects to those who were killed and their descendants.

At the onset, the RTF team didn’t know if they were going to be successful. All they knew for certain is that “we weren’t just going to stay quiet,” says Gonzales. They were braced for struggle, but thankfully, the Bullock History Museum and the public were hungry for a more accurate and inclusive history of Texas.

And so plans for the exhibit “Life and Death on the Border” began at full-speed. The very first museum exhibit on La Matanza’s history displayed personal artifacts that helped make the loss of lives concrete for visitors. The first room documented life on the border; the second, the history of La Matanza; and the final room showcased the history of resisting racism throughout the 20th century.

It was the first time the state publicly addressed La Matanza. The display was available to the public from January to April of 2016, and more than 40,000 visitors flocked to the exhibit. It went on to win two awards: the 2016 Award of Merit from the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), and the Western Historical Association’s 2017 Autry Public History Prize.

Its most recent accolade, the Herbert Feis Award, celebrates the exhibit, as well as important milestones that the project accomplished in launching this history into the public eye. Achievements include the placing of four state historical markers, which memorialize La Matanza, the Bazan and Longoria Murder, the Porvenir Massacre, and activist Jovita Idar. At the unveiling ceremonies, descendants were honored for working toward justice in the face of adversity.

“The marker that we thought would never get accepted was the first one accepted… the Matanza marker,” recalls Gonzales. The monument specifically denotes that the often-idealized Texas Rangers were responsible for these killings. Says Gonzales, “I guess we were lucky that there's this moment that people wanted an inclusive history developing at the time we were pushing forward this history that we felt needed to be told.”

And now, the story is being told all over the world. Gonzales has been interviewed by the BBC, a Dutch newspaper, CNN, and other outlets. Soon, presentations from the project’s “Reverberations of Memory, Violence, and History: A Conference for the Centennial of the 1919 Canales Investigation” will be made into a book with the University of Texas Press. There are also plans to develop a new exhibit in Brownsville in the coming year.

Gonzales hopes that the history will continue to spread and educate the public about racism. In light of the recent, horrific El Paso shooting, Gonzales believes the way forward is to continue unpacking and dismantling hatred by addressing the history of racial violence.

“You cannot defeat an ideology,” he says. “You can’t do it by taking guns away from people, and you can't do it by increasing law enforcement. Ideas have to be dealt with. And they're dealt with through education.”

Gonzales takes his passion for inclusive and accurate history into his classroom, where he sets aside time specifically to focus on Lower Rio Grande Valley history.

“A lot of students don't realize the significance of the area’s history to the development of the United States and other world events. And so they have been brought up with a negative view of the community and its place within the United States,” says Gonzales, who is working hard to change that. After all, according to Gonzales, many major historic Latino civil rights organizations come from South Texas. He hopes his students can become future leaders too.

“Why wasn't I taught this in high school?” his students often ask him. And that is where history and politics intersect.

“If your community's history is not presented within the official textbooks and lesson plans, that's a value statement of how your community is currently viewed within the world,” Gonzales says. That’s why part of Gonzales’s lifelong work is to get underrepresented histories included in history books.

Gonzales was recently involved in the five-year fight to get state standards for high school Mexican-American history classes. Part of this was helping to reject a proposed racist textbook of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Working with about 15 other scholars, Gonzales led the way in assessing the book for factual errors. They testified against it three years ago in front of the State Board of Education.

“Tuesday we testified, [the book] got rejected, and then that Friday, I got married,” recalls Gonzales. “My wife goes, ‘You're talking more about this textbook than our impending marriage!’”

The historically inaccurate textbook had garnered plenty of media attention, and by the time it was rejected, at least 15 civil rights organizations, including MALDEF and LULAC, came together to push for the creation of a Mexican American Studies class, which finally premiered this year.

The journey has also opened the door to other histories that have been underrepresented, including the recently adopted African American Studies class. Educators are creating Indigenous and Asian and Pacific Islander Studies courses as well, which will be presented to the State Board in the coming years.

“We all knew internally that it wasn't just simply a fight for Mexican American studies,” says Gonzales. “It is also a fight to open up all studies that should be included in high school education.”

As Gonzales continues his crucial work at South Texas College and beyond, he knows the power of education can empower his students to change the world.

“I know what it is to be a bad student, and I know what it is to make the Dean's list,” Gonzales relates, remembering how he struggled in his first semester in college, when he received three Ds and, ironically, an F in history. “I was also the first in my family to go to college, so like them [STC students], I understand where they're coming from.”

Gonzales loves working at STC, where he feels like he can truly make a difference in students’ lives.

“South Texas College is a great place to work and teach, particularly if you want to work with students who are the first generation to go to college,” Gonzales says. “This college is one of the top colleges that increases economic mobility with its students.”

On multiple fronts, Gonzales knows that “if you want to make an impact, this is the place.”

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*[Sidebar: For more information about the history of La Matanza, read Professor Gonzales’s Medium column, A Border Antigone: When Texas Rangers Killed Mexicans* [*https://medium.com/@trinidadgonzales/a-border-antigone-2e1fc0c564e4*](https://medium.com/%40trinidadgonzales/a-border-antigone-2e1fc0c564e4) *and check out the Refusing to Forget website at* [*https://refusingtoforget.org*](https://refusingtoforget.org)*.]*