

Our Mothers: Ofelia Esparza and Sylvia Stephens

Kitchen Table, Smithsonian Folklife Festival

July 1, 2023

Audio Transcript

Michelle Banks: So I have the pleasure of introducing to you Doña Ofelia Esparza from Los Angeles, who's a generational *ofrenda* maker, altar maker, from Los Angeles; Sylvia Stephens, who is an incredible quilter from the D.C. metropolitan area.

And there's an interesting thing about all, the both of you. I'm sure we're going to find out many interesting things about the both of you. Doña Ofelia was a National Heritage Fellow. Miss Sylvia's mom was also a Heritage Fellow in quilting, so there's that.

And both of them are from these families where they have these strong, strong generational tradition, of passing on these traditions. So all of Doña Ofelia's children work with making ofrendas, and Miss Sylvia has also taught both of her daughters and now her granddaughters this quilting tradition.

So this session is really about our mothers and what they teach us and these traditions that we share. And I've heard a lot about Miss Sylvia's mom. I would love to hear more about your mom, Doña Ofelia, and how these things were passed on. So that's what this session is all about. And I'm going to hand it over to my colleague, Diana N'Diaye, who will take you on this journey.

Diana N'Diaye: Thank you so much. And Michelle Banks, as you know, is one of the curators of this wonderful program, which looks at the connection between faith and the things that we make out of our love for our universe, for our families, for the things that are part of that creative spirit.

So Doña Ofelia and Sylvia, you've really, both in your work, you really exemplify what this means. So we want to ask, first of all, for each of you to talk a little bit about how you learned from your parents and, not only your parents, but your elders. And we can start with that. Doña Ofelia, could you?

Ofelia Esparza: Thank you. You could hear me. My voice... I was a school teacher, and I could project my voice all across the world before.

The tradition that I have, that I practice and learned was from my mother, who learned it from her great-grandmother who raised her, who learned it from *her* mother and her great-grandmother. So counting, I would say that I'm like a sixth-generation of altar making, although it was all done, all from Mexico, a small town called Huanímaro, and it's near the center. I call it

the cradle of the practices for Día de Muertos, but that traditional altar making goes beyond those two important celebrations.

My mother— My brother would say my mother came to this country, but she brought her homeland with her. All her cooking style, her traditions, her crafting, her storytelling. Unfortunately, I learned everything except the cooking. But I always live next to my mother. And I learned everything from her, usually, especially from observation.

I was born in 1932. I'm 91 years old. And all those years that that my mother was alive, she lived either next to me or I lived right next door. I had nine children. And so she was— I couldn't have done it alone, I know, without her presence and her wisdom and her advice. But my mother was a creative, take-charge person. I call her a warrior woman. She could do everything.

And she was adamant about remembering our ancestors, and the way that we do is through the *altares* or ofrendas. Ofrenda means "offerings." And she would say it's not just a devotion or a tradition. It's an obligation to remember—especially her Mama Paula. And I got to know Mama Paula—who raised my mother, who would be my great-great-grandmother—just from my mother's stories, intimate stories of not only how she worked and cooked and created, but her philosophy of being close to the earth and growing her own food. I feel so fortunate that I gained that knowledge through my mother, but my mother had the same attributes. She was a woman of great strength and power. In fact, all the women in my family were. The women were the matriarchs, the ones who taught everything.

Anyway, that's my backbone, but I guess I could say more as we go along.

Diana: Thank you. And clearly, clearly, you followed in the tradition and learned well. We're going to talk later about what you're passing on to your children. But I'd love to talk to Sylvia now and find out— your mother, who I got a chance to meet, because we're neighbors. [laughs] Tell us a little bit about, you know, how you learned from your mother and what you learned from your mother.

Sylvia Stephens: My mother was skilled at so many things, and sewing and quilting were a couple of the things that she did that I picked up on. I learned first to sew on a Singer sewing machine—you know, the foot-pedaling kind. That was how I got started, and I started by hemming flour sacks that we used as towels, and I graduated from that because flour sacks changed in design, and I could make a skirt. So once I figured out how to make clothes for myself, it was all done. I was hooked with sewing.

But my mother told me that she learned to make quilts from her mother, Grandma Cleo, her mama's mama, and her daddy's mama. So with that, that puts us with six generations of quilters, and I'm four in that line of generations of quilters. My daughters haven't quite gotten a

bug yet. But there's still time. I made my first quilt when I was like 50-something. So you know, they're still young. They'll come to quilting or something close to that.

But I embraced sewing before I did quilting. I lived with nine younger brothers and sisters, and we all had our own quilts. So if there were three of us in one bed, [laughs] we didn't have to share quilts necessarily, because we each had our own. I didn't realize my mama was making quilts and that she was famous until I retired, almost retired from the military, and went to her ceremony for her to receive her 2001 National Heritage Award. And the interviewer asked my mama, "Miss Mozell, do you have any children who quilt?" And I'm sitting out in the audience like— Well, I haven't made one yet, but we're going to fix that. That has to change.

And it did. That sparked my curiosity. I didn't know my mother was making quilts and traveling all over the place and showing them because I was out of the country for about seven or eight years during that time. But once I got the bug, there's no turning back. So I have enjoyed sewing, especially clothes for myself, which I refined in home economics in school. And quilting allows me to express my creativity. I'll dream something and draw it, and then I'll make it. And now that I know how to quilt, I make it using quilts.

Diana: That is wonderful. That is wonderful. And I had one other question for you. Where did you grow up? Did you always live in the Maryland area, or did you grow up somewhere else and then come to Maryland?

Sylvia: I was born in and spent most of my young life in Alabama around Opelika, Auburn, because Auburn University is where I attended college, Tuskegee, where the Tuskegee Airmen learn to fly and fight and set records. They're still at the top of the list. I grew up in that area. The furthest down is the capital of Montgomery. I attended Air Force reserve courses and training in those places. So Alabama.

Diana: Okay! Thank you. Thank you. So we talked about how you learned, and so the next question is— Well, I have a bunch of questions! But I know— I'm actually a quilter myself, [laughs] and so I love making things, but I know that when you're learning from your elders, there are challenges. And sometimes people see the incredible work that you make— You know, there's a National Heritage Award winner, and as someone who's the *daughter* of a National Heritage Award winner— You know, we see the amazing work that you do, but can you tell us about some of the challenges you had when you first began to work and what that taught you?

Ofelia: Well, you know, the things I learned from my mother were things that were practiced at home. It wasn't shared publicly, but she was known for these skills she had. She was so good at it, and so she was not only my mentor but mentor to other women who wanted to learn whatever it was that my mother was able to teach. But when I started doing public altar making, it, the challenge was more of how to put it across, because no one really practice a *public*

alternating in Los— I'm from East Los Angeles, where I was born. I still live in the same, four blocks from where I was born. So I've lived there all my life.

And it evolved, the practice of— Actually, it was a celebration of Día de Muertos, Day of the Dead. And it was started by a Catholic nun, Sister Karen Boccalero, who was a nun like none other. [Laughs] She lived in our community. She was a Franciscan—they didn't wear habits anymore—but an activist, an artist, and social justice person. And so when I met her in 1973, I had been teaching, just before I started teaching elementary school. I taught in the school in my own neighborhood, so I've always done everything there, college and universities there. And so she asked if I knew anything about Day of the Dead. I said yes, my mother—

Diana: I'm sorry— "If you know anything..."?

Ofelia: About Day of the Dead. I saw a sign that called for artists to participate in a weekly workshop for October in preparation for celebrating, and this was a brand-new event. Sister Karen started it in 1973 and I went on— I first met her in 1979, so she had moved her organization called Self Help Graphics, moved to our neighborhood. It was really not only a community endeavor, but also a social justice endeavor, because at that time there had been a terrible confrontation that was named the Chicano Moratorium. It was young people, especially college students, mainly neighborhood people, joined in protest marches against the Vietnam War and the high number of casualties from our community, Mexican, in proportion to our numbers. So those things were going on in the '60s and '70s.

And so when I came on to Self Help Graphics, Sister Karen had moved the organization just two blocks away from where I live. And so when I said, "Yes, my mother practices that," she said, "Well, you come Saturday and you'll be part of it." And she gave us all— It was called Self Help for the right reason. Once you got in there, you created things and met the goals she set for us, but it was a wonderful experience. I got to know many young artists. I was already older than everyone. I already had my nine children, and I was teaching. But it was a wonderful adventure, because tapping on all these creative legacies that I had from my mother and her upbringing.

But the challenge for me was— I didn't know much about public events like that. So I was doing, just participating with other artists where they created a community altar that that included any, many people from the community. But the *remembrance* part was the ofrendas, the altars. And so I started saying, "Well, can I do this part?" And she would say, "Just do your thing." And it was very in disarray for me, to my standards. So I just started doing my section, and then people would ask me.

So I would ask my mother more about her practice in her hometown, because it had always been in our home, a very humble private altar that she had all year long. And mostly it was

photographs that that she dressed up for special occasions, birthdays of our ancestors, holy days of obligation, and one of them was Day of the Dead. But compared to her Nascimento, which she was known for—it was a Christmas nativity scene that encompassed our living — her altar for Day of the Dead was very, very quiet.

But at Self Help Graphics, the event started drawing more and more people, and so then I was asked to do my own altar in a gallery space that was created. That was in 1988, and I never stopped. [laughs]

Diana: So it seems like the challenge was going from a private practice, a private family practice, to sharing that with the public. And so many times we do things around the kitchen table or in our homes and so on, and we don't— and taking that, I can see how that might become a new challenge. And so this is this is really interesting!

So, Sylvia, what for you was the was the challenge? I'm going to try to stop my phone here. [phone ringing]

Sylvia: The challenge for me was erased because my mother gave me so much freedom when it came to quilting, especially. She always said to me, "Just make something that you like, and somebody else is going to like it too." And she also said to me, "It doesn't have to be perfect." Because I want all my lines to match. I want all my angles to be straight. I want my stitches to be even. I want them to measure the same width from the edge or from the border of the quilt. So, with that kind of freedom, it was very liberating to make quilts.

The challenge for me has been to slow down, like to go to bed! [Diana laughs] To take a nap when you start sewing something. Because I could start sewing something, and I'm up, and I hear the birds singing. I see the sun come up, and then after I get to a point, I may lay down and take a nap at eight o'clock in the morning, because I've been up all night.

So because Mama was so liberating, it has just been— It's given me a sense of freedom to make quilts and to enjoy making them. I go from my dreams sometimes. I have daydreams, I see something, and I may draw it. Or, like with one of my quilts I call *Holey, Holey, Holey*, I had seen a quilt in an exhibit that has circles in it, and I learned that the lady who made the quilt had whip-stitched around about 50 or more circles, and I'm like, "Oh!" That must have taken some doing. But that *night*, I dreamed how to make a circle, and it was like almost perfect!

So I got up from that dream, and I made *three*, because I was afraid if I went back to sleep, I would forget it. And then I just made circle after circle after circle. I didn't know what I was going to do with them. And then after I got about 50 or so— [laughs]

Diana: Fifty?!

Sylvia: I still have some leftover! I decided that I would try to put them together in a quilt. That was a part of the early challenge, was how to put a quilt together the way my mother did. I thought I understood it until I tried to put a cross in the middle of a quilt with just blocks. And I called her. She told me how to do it on the phone. I still didn't get it. So she came over and showed me how to do it. And from that time, I had a much greater understanding. So that challenge went away, was for how she put her quotes together.

And *now*, I can look at her quilts and tell, pretty much, where she started, because I started dissecting them to see if I could make a quilt the way my mother made a quilt. I'm going to tell you: *that* was a challenge, but now I think I got it.

Diana: Oh, that's great. That is really great to hear, and it's wonderful. And I'm sure— Are there quilters out there? Are there craftspeople out here? Okay! That's wonderful. Well, you can understand what she's talking about then, and what Doña Ofelia is also talking about in terms of some of the challenges.

But I wanted to ask now, because this program is about the— It's called Creative Encounters. And there are all sorts of creative encounters. There are the encounters that people have with each other. There are the encounters that we have with *ourselves* in terms of trying to learn things. And then there are the encounters that we have with something larger than ourselves. No matter what we're, we call that it's something so important to all of us, because we're sharing this world, we're sharing this universe together. And so one of the things that we wanted to ask these makers of faith are how does what you do connect to your faith? And I'm going to ask you, Doña Ofelia, because you make *altars*, so it is something that—

Ofelia: You know, in my family, I was raised as a Catholic. The town where my mother came from, everyone was Catholic. And those traditions from the Catholic Church, the calendar of the Catholic Church, are really what dovetailed into the early, early practices of Indigenous people from that town. And one of my mentors, a great woman who was an artist friend of mine, told me, "Well, you know, the way that the Spanish, the Europeans, came to Mexico, it was actually a genocide. Horrible time." And one of the main goals of Spain was the resources, especially gold, and converting souls into Christianity.

I feel the Spaniards, or Europeans, succeeded, except in the complete conquering of people's souls and religious practices. Like the church has many saints and celebrations, the ancient people of Mexico had many deities, and it was all connected to nature, to Mother Earth, to the cosmos, to the elements, to the seasons, and everything that lives, even inanimate things. And so, by just virtue of survival, I believe, there was resistance—and conversion, yes, there was, because people were very religious. They adopted the new religion and practiced it very, very

religiously. And so I think that that was one of the things that impressed me about the practices in my mother's town.

Since I started doing altars, I started learning and researching this practice because what I knew was what my mother practiced. And so, after my mother died in 1991, it was a need for me to continue learning more about it. And this practice, for me, has evolved for my family and I. It has evolved into more than just a two-day celebration. And because I'm an artist, the aesthetics of the altar is important, but also the spirituality and the significance, so I incorporate many elements that are ancient, like representing the four elements of fire, water, wind, and earth. And that's what people have been doing for centuries. They didn't leave those connections to their early beliefs and practices. And so those are represented by the things on the altar.

But in addition to that, the spirituality behind that practice. So I believe we create a sacred space—an altar, the gardens, the quilting. Those are sacred practices because it's your own essence, and it's an intention of getting it done. It isn't just a craft that you want to show people, it's because it means something much deeper to your spirit, to your soul, and to connect. And so I believe that this kind of work, and every endeavor that's created, is a expression not only of gratitude and also expression of love—for the people who taught you and the people you share it with, and you hope that it's reciprocated.

So I've become more a philosopher, I think. And people like, especially when I was teaching elementary school, some of my colleagues would say, "And where do you get your philosophy? From where? What have you read?" And I said, you know, all the people I based my philosophies on never wrote a book. My mother, the elders, the people that she taught me that I learned from, others, even the parents of some of my students. Because Mexico is such a diverse country, and every region has their own way of following traditions, especially for Día de Muertos.

But today, I feel that it's my obligation, like my mother said, to pass this onto my children and my grandchildren. And I have lots of grandchildren. I have 16 grandchildren, 14 and counting great-grandchildren. But they're learning. I'm telling them the stories, like my mother told me. I want them to know who my mother was. They never met her, the young ones. How my husband, their grandfather, was. And what was important, what did they their upbringing mean to all of us? And so the connections are endless.

And that's why, when I came to this Festival, it just was so— I get emotional because we are so connected in many ways. I learned very diverse ways of creating and of beliefs. But in the core, we all have very something very much in common. We love our family. We want to remember them, and we want to pass on our stories to the next generations, and at the same time come connect with each other. And I say, what a legacy for the practice of what I do, and other people do, to be loved and cherished even after death, but also to connect with other cultures. And in

our case, I feel making the ofrendas is a bridge to between life and death, a bridge between the living and the dead, and especially a bridge between generations. So there's a lot to learn from. I'm still learning. I haven't learned everything. And I love this kind of practice and this participation, because I'm learning. It's wonderful.

Diana: Thank you so much. And I think that what you've said really is what this program is about, but it's also the kind of wisdom that I know you're passing onto your children as well. But I think that, in terms of what you're saying also, we talk about faith being more than religion, and spirituality of course being much more than religion, and the fact that you're talking about the way that we're connected being a part of this, and so thank you so much.

And Sylvia, I'd love to hear you. The question is, how does what you do connect to your faith? And it may be faith in terms of religion, but it may be much larger in terms of your spirituality.

Sylvia: For me, when I was gathering my quilts together— I do quilt blocks and quilts, and I take— Of course, quilt blocks are building blocks for a quilt, but I like some of the smaller ones better. The first time I made a quilt and I felt a spiritual connection was the quilt that I named *Holey, Holey, Holey*.

As I mentioned before, I was inspired to make that quilt from another one that I had seen, so to me that was a connection between the lady who made it and an inspiration for me to make it. And then after I got the blocks made, and then I got the quilt made, I'm like, "Well, what am I going to name it?" I didn't know you named quilts until I started working with my mother. I just thought you'd make them and put them on the bed! But some people name them, and some people number them.

After I made that quilt, I was sitting in my preacher's chair. I had a preacher chair in my bedroom. I was sitting in my preacher's chair [laughs] and I heard "Holy, holy, holy." I'm like, "Huh! Holy, holy, holy." And to me, that meant the Holy Spirit, the Holy Father, and the son of the Holy Father, Jesus. And so, because I research stuff, I went to the Scriptures, and I typed in "holy, holy, holy." And what do you know, there's a scripture that says "holy, holy, holy is the Lord." And I'm like, "That's it! That's the name of this quilt!"

That was my first experience with that kind of a connection. And then, another time I had what I call a spiritual *inspiration* or connection was— I had been reading the Bible, and that day I wanted to know a little bit more about love and what the Bible said about love and what it means and what it is and what it does. So I just searched the Scriptures for love. And in the reading of the Scriptures for love, I just thought, "There ought to be a way to make a quilt block that says *love*." Sometime later, I ran across a postage stamp, that was a *love* postage stamp, and I saw this stamp, I'm like, "Oh, I bet I can make this! Or something like it." So I took the postage— I think it was 2006, and it was L, O, the V was a heart, and then the letter E.

Well, I couldn't quite do it that way, or it didn't— It wasn't what I wanted to express. So I drew it, and I made it. So in my tent over here, I have love quilts, but that came from reading the Scriptures and then being led to the postage stamp that inspired me to create that quilt. And I know it was something different, because I was able to get a copyright for it, so I'm like, "Ohh!"

Diana: That's a whole other issue that we would love to talk about in another session! That's great.

Sylvia: And sometimes I have dreams. And to me, that's the connection. And because my mother said to me, "You can make whatever you want to make," I hear her talking to me when I make quilts sometimes. "Just finish the quilt, Sylvia," is what she would say. Or she would say, "It doesn't have to be perfect." So I not only apply that thinking to quilting, but to other things that I do as well. And I teach my children the same thing.

Diana: That is wonderful. Well, you know, this is this is such an amazing session. And the time has gone by so fast. But these incredibly wise women and incredible artists, creators, teachers, educators are here, right here in the area down here on the Mall today, so we encourage you to go over and speak to them and to commune and to communicate. This is what the Festival of American Folklife, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival is all about. It's a chance that we get to speak with and to gain wisdom and to share wisdom with really wonderful people, like Doña Ofelia, with Cynthia and— I'm sorry with *Sylvia*.

And so we are getting ready for our next program right now, but as I said, we're so glad you're here. We're so glad to have been speaking with these incredible women. And so we want to thank you. And we'd like to give a little applause. [applause] Thank you.

Sylvia: Just remember, we are all creators of something.

Diana: That's right. That's right.

Ofelia: And we're all connected.

Sylvia: Creators and connected!

Diana: Creators and connectors, yes.