

Fiesta medals' stories can steal your heart

By Elaine Ayala | April 16, 2017



Those in the outside world — that is, those who don't seek out and acquire the trinkets of Fiesta with mad abandon, spending hundreds, perhaps thousands of dollars in the process — just don't understand the zeal surrounding the celebration's shiny baubles.

Inside the mania, however, the arrival of every new medal becomes news, impetus for yet another medal reveal party, swap or sale. Facebook groups herald details, especially those that are free, or the hardest and most limited.

The excitement of designing and ordering medals, by the way, begins months before Fiesta, as the smartest companies and nonprofit groups place orders in the fall for the next year's celebrations.

Still, what I love most about medals isn't the beauty or bling, the glee of collecting or the clanging of medals on a sash. It's the stories that get me. They're embedded within, and they can surprise, steal your heart and educate.

This year the San Antonio Express-News' annual Fiesta Medals Contest received more than 450 medals, up by 150 from 2016. That's still only a fraction of the medals that will be in circulation during Fiesta, which begins Thursday at Hemisfair. Many more medals have yet to arrive from Chinese factories, which is by and large where they're made.

Every year, Sandee Johns' tribute medal to her only child, Preston, breaks my heart. He died at 25, a victim of drunken driving. For several years, her medal has depicted penguins, because he liked how they looked dressed for a ball. Each year, the back of her medal counsels us not to drink and drive.

Bittersweet stories of remembrance are also at the heart of two other medals from Garcia's Mexican Food and Angel's Mexican Haven. The latter depicts a woman with wings on her shoulders. Her head is crestfallen and wearing a charro hat. It's a tribute to cashier Ana Martinez, who died of kidney failure and was the owner's oldest daughter.

Garcia's medal represents loss, too, for restaurant co-founder Yolanda Garcia. Her quaint purple apron symbolizes her love of cooking and is the color of the Alzheimer's Association's ribbon.

Why dachshunds have ended up being the cutest Fiesta medals, I don't know, but Virginia K. Rainey and Joni Drought's love of short-legged wiener dogs can't help but make you smile. Rainey put all three of her pets, Stella, Bella and Ella, on her medal, and Drought decided to make hers a mariachi this year.

Dr. Olga Jaimez of 4 Paws Animal Hospital produced a medal depicting a rescue pup who lost his right ear in a dog attack. "Newman the Una Oreja Luchador" was only 6 weeks old then.

"Newman has always been a brave one," Jaimez said in her contest submission, so he was cast as a Mexican wrestler, or *luchador*, Spanish for fighter. He's now 16 months old.

While some medals represent crass commercialism, having seen the dollars behind their allure, there are still many causes behind medals, and they're wide and diverse.

South Texas Accelerated Research Therapeutics' medal points to its San Antonio 1000 Cancer Genome Project. Established to fast-track development for a cancer cure, it's "conducting whole genome sequencing of cancerous and normal issues," and "will link the genome alternations that underlie the cancers to detailed clinical outcomes." Data will be made public and available at no cost to researchers worldwide.

Many medals raise money for worthy causes such as Meals on Wheels, now in its 40th year in San Antonio; San Antonio Housing Authority's scholarship fund; a fourth Ronald McDonald House in the Medical Center; and the Edwards Aquifer Conservancy, whose medal depicts the endangered Texas Blind Salamander and reminds us that 2 million South Central Texans depend on the aquifer for water.

Some nonprofit causes may seem less urgent but show San Antonio's heart for causes, such as Beethoven Maennerchor's Gartenfest medal, whose proceeds will go to the restoration of its old bowling alley.

In a town that will mark its 300th anniversary next year, there are many medals that celebrate history and diversity.

There's the first-ever medal from the Tuesday Musical Club, depicting the china on which its members served high tea; the United Communities of San Antonio, which works to eliminate bullying, prejudice and racism; Schilo's, the German deli marking its centennial; and KFW Engineers & Surveying, whose medal is a nod to Hispanic culture and its goal of creating "an all-inclusive environment that celebrates and uplifts the culture of our diverse city."

The Mexican American Unity Council's medal celebrates its 50th anniversary, while the law firm Higdon, Hardy & Zuflacht's eighth medal in a series commemorating the flags of Texas this year honors the "First Company of Texas Volunteers from New Orleans," whose members died in several battles, including the Alamo.

The descendants of Alamo defender Gregorio Esparza, the only combatant to receive a Christian burial, honor their ancestor on its medal. Along with these, far more will be found in the slideshow that will appear this week on

mysanantonio.com.

In it, we'll reveal every Fiesta medal the contest received as well as this year's winners. Look hard enough and each one tells a story.

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