

Heart of culture

Music, tradition drive successful educator-lawyer Lorenzo Trujillo

By Marc Shulgold
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As a boy growing up in Denver and on a ranch outside Taos, N.M., Lorenzo A. Trujillo was surrounded by music. His father played guitar, his mother danced and his aunt sang to him the songs of his people — melodies, he would later discover, that went back two and three centuries.

Today, Trujillo, 53, holds a couple of impressive titles — assistant dean of the University of Colorado Law School and President of the Colorado Hispanic Bar Association. But his heart and soul rest with the cultural traditions of early Colorado and New Mexico. And not just as a fan.

For years, he directed various folkdance companies and has played violin with the nine-member Mariachi Alegre as well as the Southwest Musicians quintet, regulars at The Fort Restaurant in Morrison.

He has also devoted himself to compiling the songs and dances that have been central to life among generations of Latinos in the Southwest.

Last weekend in Pueblo, Trujillo was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award from Hilos Culturales for his work in preserving 17th- and 18th-century music and dance of Colorado and New Mexico.

Hilos Culturales was born in January 1999, thanks to a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, with a mission to promote the cultural traditions of the region. No surprise, then, that Trujillo was a key player from the start.

"I was there when Hilos was created," he said. "I was on board as a musician and as a lawyer, to write the 501(c)(3) application (for nonprofit status)."

His life in the legal profession seems a far cry from his early years, when he seemed destined to be a performing artist. Trujillo recalled how he quickly absorbed the songs and dances taught to him by family members.

Whenever he attended gatherings, he felt drawn to the music. "I was always scratching (the notes) out, because I was afraid I'd forget them," he said. "And there are others who have that same personal attachment. A lot of old-timers are covetous of some songs. They'll tell me, 'That's our family heritage.'"

"I started to understand how important it was to preserve this, because there's a lot of assimilation and loss of culture going on."

Trujillo's passion for this music was fed by his natural curiosity about its origins. The more he researched, the more intrigued he became; and the more he learned, the more he wanted to share.

His love of knowledge had earlier led him to obtain a doctorate in education at the University of San Francisco. Back in Denver, he served as principal of Lester Arnold High School.

As his academic career developed, Trujillo's love of Latino culture never fell far from view.

"I was teaching at the University of Pacific," he said, "and I was showing some students a southwestern dance. I did a little reading on it and found out that it was originally an Austrian waltz from a 17th-century court."

"Today, a lot of the waltzes and polkas I play with the Southwest Musicians are European in nature, probably connected to Maximilian" — a reference to the mid-19th-century emperor of Mexico who was originally an archduke of Austria.

Trujillo points to several seminal books on the subject of Southwest music and dance, dating to Mela Sedillo's *Mexi-*



Lorenzo Trujillo, right-front, poses with his group, the Southwest Musicians. His dedication to preservation and presentation of traditional music of Colorado and New Mexico has earned him the Hilos Culturales Lifetime Achievement Award.

Some of Lorenzo Trujillo's music

- **Southwest Musicians** — *Presenting the Musical Traditions of Colorado and New Mexico* (privately issued)
- **Mariachi Alegre** — *Con Cariño* (privately issued)
- **Information on the bands and their recordings:** 303-460-9891.



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can and New Mexican Folk Dances from 1935. But the true research, he stressed, comes from watching and listening and doing.

"Most of my field work came from performances by my family and friends. The academic work fills in some of the gaps. That involves finding the roots and origins of some of the tunes — like that Austrian Window Dance that I mentioned."

The question of a melody's authenticity is easily answered, he noted: "The people here know that it's authentic, because they've been playing it all their life." Even in these modern times, Trujillo added, there are "little pockets of authentic families" in Colorado and New Mexico who zealously maintain cultural traditions.

While he collected and scrupulously notated the melodies he heard at southwestern gatherings as a young

man, Trujillo honed his violin-playing and found steady work as a dancer. He teamed with his sister Karen and performed for diners at Casa Bonita in Lakewood.

In later years, he formed several companies of dancers, maintaining at least two full-time groups simultaneously.

In 1974, when he completed his master's degree at CU, he was the recipient of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to establish a folkloric dance program at the school.

Soon after, he began life as a touring performer. "I traveled all over the country, and was making a good living as a dancer," he noted. "As I got into the management and administration side of being in a company, I realized I didn't know the business aspect — even though my dad was a businessman. So I got a doctorate in law, to make sure I

could properly promote the business end of it."

His career in the legal profession quickly blossomed, yet he never abandoned his parallel life as dancer and musician. With his aunt, Eva Nuñez, and his son, Lorenzo F. Trujillo, he continued to play violin with Southwest Musicians (Nuñez, he reported, recently retired at age 83). And, with his son and fellow Southwest bandmates Lerry Medina and Mark Wilson, Trujillo is leader of Mariachi Alegre, formed in 1969.

"I've done a lot of writing and a lot of performing over the years," he said. "I've found that what I do can make people happy. There's just a magic moment when it all comes together."

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