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Luis Leal, Distinguished Professor of Chicana and Chicano Studies, Dies at 102

Luis Leal, distinguished professor of Chicana and Chicano studies at UC Santa Barbara and an internationally recognized scholar of Mexican, Chicano, and Latin American literature, died January 25. He was 102.

Leal, author of more than 45 books and 400 scholarly articles, remained a prolific researcher and writer until his death. One of his books, "A Brief History of the Mexican Short Story," is considered a landmark of modern literary scholarship.

Leal was a member of the UCSB faculty since 1976. Earlier in his career, he held teaching positions at the University of Chicago, the University of Mississippi, Emory University, and the University of Illinois.

"Professor Leal was a beloved member of our campus community and a scholar of tremendous international renown," said UCSB Chancellor Henry Yang. "With respect and affection, we called him 'Don Luis.' His contributions to our university and our society are a legacy that we will treasure always. In addition to his brilliant intellect, he will be remembered for his kindness, generosity, and humility, as well as for his joyful heart."

Leal received many honors, including the prestigious National Humanities Medal, which was presented at the White House in 1997 by then-President Bill Clinton. In 1988, he received the Distinguished Scholar Award from the National Association for Chicano Studies in recognition of his lifetime achievements. In 1991, he was awarded the Mexico Order of the Aztec Eagle, the highest honor granted to foreign citizens by the Mexican government.

"Don Luis was an extraordinary teacher and scholar and an inspiration to generations of students," said Melvin Oliver, UCSB's SAGE Sara Miller McCune Dean of Social Sciences. "At UCSB, we honor his legacy with both the Luis Leal Social Sciences Undergraduate Award, which is given annually to a graduating student in the social sciences for outstanding interdisciplinary work, and with the Luis Leal Chair in Chicana and Chicano studies. There is no better way to celebrate the life and accomplishments of Luis Leal than by recognizing the passion and dedication of our exceptional students and the kind of interdisciplinary scholarship that characterizes the Luis Leal Professorship."

In 1995, UCSB established the Luis Leal Endowed Chair, which he held until 1997. Maria Herrera-Sobek, a professor of Chicana and Chicano studies at UCSB, held the chair from 1997 through 2009. She also serves as associate vice chancellor for diversity, equity, and academic policy.

"Professor Luis Leal was a World War II hero, a scholar and a gentleman, and I am honored and privileged to have been his friend and colleague for almost 34 years," said Herrera-Sobek. "I admired his brilliance, his keen intellect, his humility, and his love of teaching, research and learning. He is truly a giant who was fortunate to live in two centuries, and to have friends and admirers all over the world.

We will all miss him greatly."

UCSB celebrated Leal's 100th birthday in October 2007 with a two-day conference featuring panel discussions, special remembrances, and a screening of the film "Luis Leal: A Journey of 100 Years/Luis Leal: Un Camino De 100 Años," which was written, directed, and produced by Janette Garcia. The film was commissioned for the event.

Leal was also the subject of the book "Luis Leal, an Auto/Biography," written by Mario T. García, professor of Chicana and Chicano studies at UCSB, and published in 2000 by the University of Texas Press.

"Luis Leal, to me, was the ultimate role model of a scholar who was thoroughly committed to his work and at the same time was a kind, considerate, and compassionate human being," said García. "It was not how long Don Luis lived that is important, but how he lived his life."

In addition to being a visiting professor at UCSB, Leal previously edited a literary periodical sponsored by the Center for Chicano Studies called "Ventana Abierta: Revista Latina de Literatura, Arte y Cultura."

"Don Luis was an extraordinary mentor and friend who generously shared his knowledge and brought people together through a humble personality and his charisma," said Francisco Lomelí, chair of UCSB's Department of Spanish and Portuguese and professor of Chicana and Chicano studies. "His love of life was exemplary and his curiosity infinite. He will be missed for all his many contributions."

Each year, UCSB and the Santa Barbara Book Council choose a winner of the Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature. The award was created in 2003 to honor Leal for being a pioneer in recognizing and promoting the merit of Mexican, Chicano, and Latin American literary and cultural traditions. The inaugural winner of the award in 2003 was Oscar Hijuelos, author of "The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love" and other novels. Other past winners include Graciela Limón, Pat Mora, Alejandro Morales, Denise Chávez, María Elena Viramontes, and Rudolfo Anaya.

Leal was born Sept. 17, 1907, in Linares, Mexico. After the Mexican Revolution, he immigrated to the United States, and settled in Chicago. He married Gladys Clemens in 1936 and they had two children, Antonio Leal and Luis Alonso Leal, now deceased. He received a Bachelor of Science degree in Spanish from Northwestern University in 1940; a master's in Spanish from the University of Chicago in 1941; and a Ph.D. in Spanish and Italian from the University of Chicago in 1950. He served in the U.S. Army from 1943-45.

Leal is survived by his son, Antonio, two grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. His wife, Gladys Leal, died in 2001.

Funeral arrangements are being made through Pueblo del Rey Funeral Services. Visitation will take place from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Monday, February 1, at First Christian Church, 1915 Chapala St., Santa Barbara. A graveside service will follow at 3 p.m. at Goleta Cemetery, 44 S. San Antonio Rd., Goleta. Plans for a campus

memorial are being developed.

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About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.