

THE *Current*

August 13, 2019

Jim Logan

La Profesora del Mundo

[Sara Poot-Herrera](#) has long had one foot in the U.S. and the other in Mexico. A professor in UC Santa Barbara's [Department of Spanish and Portuguese](#), she's been a powerful champion of Mexican and Spanish-American literature. Her scholarship and support of *literatura iberoamericana* have brought her numerous awards, including some of the most prestigious honors Mexico bestows.

Now, capping an extraordinary academic year, she has been honored in a rather personal way. This summer the town of Temax in Yucatán state opened the House of Culture "Dra. Sara Poot-Herrera." Her mother, Sara María Herrera-Arceo, was born in Temax (*teh-mahsh* in Mayan), a rural town about 50 miles east of Mérida, and returned in the 1980s as a teacher. She remained there after her retirement.

Naming the house after Poot-Herrera, she was told, was the town's way of emphasizing its dedication to a broad swath of cultural pursuits.

"I wondered why the house didn't have Mom's name," she said. "One person told me, 'Your mother was very important to education, but now we are trying to work on culture.' "

The dedication of the house of culture in a large, new building was accompanied by a town-wide celebration, including a parade, regional dancers, music, fireworks and more. The Temax municipal president, the town council and the Yucatán secretary of culture attended as well.

Poot-Herrera, who called Temax “a native, bilingual, ancient, mestizo, modern town,” was deeply touched.

“I was trying to not cry,” she said. “We went from my mom’s house to the town [square]. It was a big ceremony. The whole town was there. That night I was thinking of my mom. My brothers and my sister were there. My sister told me, ‘You have a great responsibility now.’ Of course I know. I like it.”

Poot-Herrera, who received UC Santa Barbara’s Outstanding Graduate Mentor Award for the 2013-14 academic year, said she will solicit books for the house from friends, many of whom are writers.

The Temax dedication was just the latest of Poot-Herrera’s honors in Mexico. Earlier in the year, she helped inaugurate the Reading Room “Dra. Sara Poot-Herrera” in the Hoctún Cultural Center, about 30 miles southeast of Mérida.

The event followed the conclusion of the XII International Congress of UC-Mexicanistas, the UC Santa Barbara-based association of Mexican culture scholars in and outside Mexico which convenes over one hundred scholars and writers in the U.S., Mexico and Europe.

“What a joy to share that day with children and people of all ages in that town,” said Poot-Herrera, who is co-founder and director of the group. “We will surely help to fill the room with books and readers.”

Before that, the National Literature Coordination of Fine Arts of Mexico (Bellas Artes) named her one of the “Protagonists of Mexican Literature.”

“I was told,” she said, “it was because of my contributions to Mexican literature, in terms of publications, teaching, cultural presence in Mexico, and Mexico in California. And, to a large extent, as co-founder and director of UC-Mexicanistas.”

Poot-Herrera was accompanied at the ceremony in Mexico City’s Palace of Fine Arts by the writer Elena Poniatowska, the poet David Huerta, and the dean of the University of the Cloister of Sor Juana, Carmen Beatriz López Portillo. Writers, academics, students, former students, family, friends and the general public also attended.

“It was a very emotional night,” she said.

Looking ahead, in September UC Mexicanistas will open a satellite center of the Culture House and the Reading Room in the Mayan archeological center of Uxmal, about 40 miles south of Mérida.

Next January, the organization will also have a poetry festival in Mérida, which will be attended by Portuguese poet Nuno Júdice plus the usual large numbers of researchers and writers.

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.