Finding identity in a world of diversity

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CHICAGO — In 1987 a group of teachers and social activists of Mexican descent and living in Chicago realized there was no fair representation of the importance of the Mexican community and culture in the city.

"One-fourth of the population in school was of Mexican descent, but still there was no interest in Mexican culture," said Cesareo Moreno.

So, the community decided to fill that dramatic gap by launching a very ambitious project that lead to the creation of the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, where today Moreno is the visual arts director. This museum not only filled the gap, it first and foremost came to symbolize the "pride and self empowerment" of the city’s Mexican population.

Furthermore, Moreno said in an interview, the fact that it was located in Pilsen, the city’s Mexican neighborhood, instead of downtown Chicago, where there was money and more people, was further proof that the museum was a community-oriented institution.

In contrast to most museums, the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum was not the result of a beautiful collection searching for an exhibition venue. Rather, it stemmed from a shortage, from a lack of information and a need for educating Chicago’s Mexican community at a particular moment in history. This was why the founders were teachers and social activists rather than art experts.

Fifteen years later, the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum had become a cultural reference center. With a collection of more than 2,000 works of art, ranging from colonial art to modern art by Mexican artists living both in Mexico and the United States. With two exhibition rooms and a gift shop plus many other facilities, the museum seemed to symbolize the Mexican success in Chicago.

In spite of its high reputation, officials of the museum remained true to its initial philosophy. Admission to the museum was free because they thought that most Mexican immigrants in the area were low income. It was not surprising, said the director of visual arts, to see parents and their kids coming to the center on Sundays and Saturdays.

The work of the center continued to be centered on education and interpretation of the Mexican
community, which accounted for 50 percent of the visitors to the museum. The other half were non-Mexicans. That was why, said Moreno, "We spend a lot of time, money and arguments for translations."

As a result, the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum was one of the best bilingual cultural attractions in the city, and more and more students were visiting with their teachers.

From this exposure Moreno hoped that Mexican culture would bring to the United States a full appreciation of life and the celebration of family.