A broad smile played across Carlos Tortolero's face when he paused to retell the origin of the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum. Then his words tumbled out like strumming of guitars, fast and frantic.

"Very few people believed we could do it," said Tortolero, executive director of the Pilsen museum which will celebrate its 10th anniversary today. "Now people say they were behind it, but we remember."

He laughed. "I know I speak fast," Tortolero said, then he plunged ahead, recalling 1982, when he -- as a Bowen High School history teacher -- was among a group who saw the need for such an institution in Chicago's Mexican neighborhood. Looking around Pilsen, they found the 1930s-era Harrison Park boathouse at 1852 W. 19th. The site was ideal and the Park District agreed to let them use it.

Their cultural mission, he said, was "sacred, holy. We want to teach everybody about who we are, because the more people understand us . . . the easier it is to dispel stereotypes."

From such humble beginnings, christened by Mayor Harold Washington, and visited the first year by a handful of people, the museum has grown to attract nearly 100,000 visitors last year, including visits from more than 900 schools, ranging from preschools to colleges. The permanent collection numbers more than 1,000 works of art. There are also visiting exhibitions, including the current display from Mexico's Basilica of Guadelupe.

The 15,000-square-foot structure is open every day except Mondays without charge. Tortolero, born in Mexico in 1954, came with his family to the Taylor Street neighborhood when he was 3. He is still surprised that some people question the mission of this community-based cultural center.

"People want us to prove the art is good and they want to know whether we can manage a program," he said.

As the percentage of Mexican Americans in Chicago continues to climb, Tortolero said, the museum's importance grows. Later this spring, the center plans to break ground for a two-year, $7 million expansion that will triple the exhibit space.
"We hope to become the only museum which will have a complete display of Mexican art and culture throughout history, starting with Mayans and Aztecs and heading up to contemporary Pilsen artists," he said.

Also, the group has designs to create a park, complete with traditional wrought-iron benches, dedicated to Mexican Americans who have served in the United States armed forces.

On a recent day, people arrived from all parts of the metropolitan area. Ana Herrera brought her daughter, Jasmine, 2, along with nine others from Mundelein to see the exhibits for the first time.

"This was nice," Herrera said. "Usually, you'd have to go to Mexico to see something like this."

**GRAPHIC:** Carlos Tortolero, executive director of the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, helped open the museum, 1852 W. 19th, 10 years ago today.

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