

WORDFEST OC

# Celebrating the power of words to connect, heal and inspire

Poetry, stories, writing, performances featured

By Lou Ponsi  
contributing writer

Simply defined, Saddleback College's inaugural WORDFEST OC was a celebration of written and spoken words in all their creative forms.

The daylong literary festival, held Oct. 18 on the Saddleback campus, featured poetry readings, storytelling, writing workshops, spoken word performances, art displays and panel discussions.

"The festival brought people together to celebrate the beauty and power of spoken and written words, with their capacity to inspire, to teach, to heal and to connect us through our shared humanity," said Saddleback English professor Gina Shaffer, WORDFEST OC organizer. "I thought we should have a showcase that lets the community as well as the campus celebrate the talents that we have."

The keynote event of the festival was "Origin Stories: Indigenous & Immigrant Voices of Orange County," which featured poet Adelia Sandoval, a linear descendant of her Acjachemen ancestors, the first inhabitants of Orange County; Gustavo Hernandez, poet laureate of Orange County; and novelists Lan Cao and Namrata Podder.

All read excerpts from their works reflecting on the complexities of the immigrant experience, including the role reversal that occurs when children of immigrants take on greater authority than their parents because they have mastered English and adapted more quickly to the American way of life.

"The exchange between the panelists and with the audience was so intimate and deeply affecting," said Shaffer, who moderated the session. "I felt like the discussion was an enlightening and healing experience for all participants."

A panel discussion titled "War of Words" centered around the topic of book banning, including the motivation behind the controversial practice and why access to print materials is necessary in order to preserve democracy.

Panelists included Saddleback English Department instructors Ray Zimmerman and Jennifer Hedgecock and librarian Alicia Zach.

"I think students seem to really understand that or have had experience



PHOTO BY DREW A. KELLEY, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Sandy Siegel performs "Moon River" during WORDFEST OC hosted by Saddleback College on Oct. 18.

with being able to identify some of the hardships that they're experiencing in literature," said English professor Catherine Hayter, who moderated the panel discussion. "And I think that the controversial themes seem to really resonate with them and help them through those experiences."

Another session celebrated the works of student writers, artists and musicians for the WALL 2024 Literary Journal, an award-winning student produced collection, which has been recognized nationally as a top community college literary-art magazine.

Co-hosted by Shaffer and WALL editor-in-chief Will Stanley, the session included four choreography students dancing to a moon-themed medley of songs and a guitarist-vocalist singing "Moon River" — all linked to the lunar motif of this year's WALL.

Another presentation included five

students, with two donning cowboy hats, giving an oral interpretation of "Blue Suede Shoes," an apocalyptic western by WALL staffer Amber Franklin.

A panel discussion, "Creative writing in the age of AI," centered, in part, around the potential legal issues of using content generated by artificial intelligence, which is becoming increasingly prevalent.

Gustavo Arellano, LA Times columnist and author and self-described "chronicler of the hidden histories of Orange County," chronicled highlights of his career in journalism, which included his nationally recognized "Ask a Mexican" column featured regularly in OC Weekly.

WORDFEST OC also included a storytelling and art workshop for kids and a collection of booths representing culture clubs and campus literary journals.

"I think it's amazing that our campus

is creating an event like this," Stanley said. "I think that it's natural for a community college's student body to be pretty scattered. We all go home. We all have our own lives. So, it's hard to bring everybody together around something central. But I'm really grateful for our school creating something that we can gather around and all participate in."

The event was sponsored by the School of Humanities & Social Sciences; the School of Arts, Media, Performance & Design, the Student Development Office; Associated Student Government; the Saddleback College Foundation; the Office of Equity, Inclusion, and Access; and the Office of Student Success.

"I hope this becomes an annual event," Shaffer said. "We really wanted to have a variety of activities for all ages, and not only have students, faculty, and administrators involved, but also the community. It's a pretty full day."



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