

First Latina State Historian Wants Youth to Learn History

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August 16, 2021

Helping people learn more about the history of North Denver, such as Globeville, and encouraging youth to ask about their family history are two areas Colorado's latest state historian hopes to focus attention on.

Dr. Nicki Gonzales, a professor of history and Vice Provost for Diversity and Inclusion at Regis University, began a one-year term as the official state historian on Colorado Day, Sunday, Aug. 1. The position was established in 1924 and Gonzales is the first Latina to hold it.

As a child, Gonzales said she was drawn to history and American historical figures and questioned her grandparents about her family's history. She is a native of Denver and her family has deep roots in Southern Colorado and Northern New Mexico.

"I was more interested in things like that than I was in fantasy or other things kids are into," she added.

Later, while working toward an English degree at the University of Colorado in Boulder, Gonzales took part in the Center of the American West, which offers an 18-credit undergraduate certificate program in Western American studies.

"Those classes helped me understand my own family's stories," Gonzales said, and in her senior year, she decided to become a history professor.

The Globeville area of North Denver is one with stories to tell, Gonzales said.

"My mom and dad both grew up there and there's a large history of Globeville that's incredibly diverse," she said. "People who lived there came from all over the globe, so it earned its name. I think it's one of the richest neighborhoods in terms of history and stories in the Denver area."



Dr. Nicki Gonzales. Photo courtesy of History Colorado

Gonzales was not sure she would have remained a history professor if she had not been able to advocate for underrepresented communities.

“Latino history is diverse, but I feel some of it is pushed to the wayside,” she said. “There’s real power in these stories.”

Gonzales also wants to help nurture intergenerational conversations between younger people and their elders, much as she did as a child with her grandparents.

“Once kids know about their family roots, they become more grounded and resilient,” Gonzales stated. “Maybe that’s one thing that can help Colorado survive its problems.”

One way to encourage kids to learn about history is through History Colorado’s History Buffs program, Gonzales said. It offers free admission for 4th graders and their families to 10 museums and historic sites History Colorado oversees.

The state historian has been part of a five-person council since 2018, when History Colorado established the State Historian’s Council to focus on different perspectives and reinforce the collective foundation of history and storytelling. The council rotates its leadership position annually on Colorado Day.

Gonzales’ research interests include the land grant movements of Southern Colorado and the experiences of Chicano Vietnam Veterans. Her historical expertise has focused on Chicano history and Southwest social and political movements.

“History is something that can really be a tool to help ground ourselves when we ask ‘how did we get here,’” Gonzales stated. “Not only where we are, but where we’ve been and to help prepare us for conversations we all should have to help create a society we all want to live in.”