

Hayward: Ohlone elder reflects on roots in Cal State East Bay exhibit



Ruth Orta at a family photo display at the C.E. Smith Museum of Anthropology on the Cal State East Bay campus Hayward, California on March 10, 2017. Photo by Paul Kuroda The C.E. Smith Museum is featuring an exhibit detailing the Jalquin/Saclan Ohlone/Bay Miwok roots of Ruth Orta, along with more than five generations and 60 members of her extended family. They share the details of their tribal, family and ancestral history as Native American descendants of a Bay Area tribe that once lived in mid-Alameda County. Photo by Paul Kuroda.



By [Darin Moriki](#)

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HAYWARD — Her entire life, Ruth Orta has never had a doubt in her mind about who she is.

Her mother, Trina Marine Ruano, was proud of her Ohlone roots and made sure Orta knew where she came from, but Orta admits she really did not begin to learn much about her culture until she was in her 50s.

“My mom was so proud of who she was and always told me, ‘Don’t you ever forget that you’re native,’ ” Orta, 82, said in an interview last Friday.

“She said who she was; she was outspoken, she could tell you off in beautiful English and you would never know that you were told off. She didn’t have to cuss or use curse words at all, but she stood up for everything that she was,” she said.

Orta is now a Jalquin/Saclan and Ohlone/Bay Miwok elder. Some of her story, along with those of her more than 60 family members, are on display at C.E. Smith Museum of Anthropology on the Cal State East Bay campus. Nostalgic keepsakes and traditional Ohlone crafts showcase her Native American heritage.

Work on the exhibit, called “Against All Odds: Native Californian Stories of Endurance & Continuance,” began in 2015, when De Anza College cultural anthropology professor Nancy Olsen, who studied Bay Area Ohlone families in the 1980s, contacted museum administrators about the idea. The museum then brought in East Bay Regional Park District naturalist and ethnographer Beverly Ortiz, who studied and befriended Orta’s family in the early 1990s, to collaborate on the project.

Museum administrators and the two researchers then applied for a \$10,000 grant through California Humanities, a nonprofit partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, to fund the exhibit and offset costs needed to interview three generations of Ruth’s family, including some of her seven children, 17 grandchildren and 37 great-grandchildren.

The grant was awarded in the winter of 2015.

The video interviews of Ruth’s family were transcribed by Cal State East Bay and De Anza College students, who used the information to put together a comprehensive exhibit that highlights traditional Ohlone and Miwok practices and illustrates how Orta’s family has branched off and become culturally diverse.

“This is a really unique opportunity to work with modern people about their own heritage and how they’re keeping it going today as well as how their lives were lived since the time of European contact,” museum Associate Director Marjorie Rhodes-Ousley said in an interview.

“Typically, as an anthropology museum, we’re generally exhibiting more historical events in the past, and we’ve done a couple exhibits on DNA with students that studied the genetic origins of different people. But this is a really exciting and different opportunity to have this local family’s story told from the East Bay,” she said.

Orta, a Newark resident and retired Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority light-rail operator, said her journey to learn about her Ohlone culture began innocuously in the early

1990s, when her youngest son Rick serendipitously struck up a conversation with Ortiz during a trip to Sacramento.

“He was so excited, and I had already been meeting with people who were into the native stuff, but they were people just like me and didn’t know how to do anything or speak the language,” Orta said.

“We knew who we were, so that wasn’t a problem, but I always wondered, ‘How did they (the Ohlone) live? What language did they speak?’ ”

She eventually met with Ortiz at Coyote Hills Regional Park in Fremont and began meeting with other Ohlone cultural practitioners to learn about how they lived and were raised.

In the years that followed, Orta’s thirst for knowledge became a family affair. Her granddaughter, Sabrina Garibay, became adept at making cords or rope out of dogbane plants.

Her daughter, Ramona Garibay, has become an expert at making traditional brushes out of soaproot plants that were once used to clean baskets and mortar stones.

Orta, meanwhile, takes pride in making traditional acorn soup.

“Each one of us has our place on the Earth to do what we have to do, and that’s the way I feel about it,” Orta said as she walked through the museum.

“I feel that this here is a dream come true and my mom is with us,” she said.

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‘AGAINST ALL ODDS’

‘Native Californian Stories of Endurance & Continuance’

Where: Clarence E. Smith Museum of Anthropology, Cal State East Bay, Meiklejohn Hall, Room 4047, 25800 Carlos Bee Blvd., Hayward

When: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday until June 10, except for March 16 -26, March 31 and May 29

Cost: Free

More information: 510-885-7414, <https://www.csueastbay.edu/museum/virtual-museum/native-california/index.html>

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