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Since 1964

Friendship scales the wall

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Former first lady Pat Nixon extended her hand across the U.S.-Mexico border to greet Mexican residents during the inauguration of Friendship Park in Playas de Tijuana 40 years ago. In her eyes, she said the purpose of Friendship Park was for families living in the United States to be connected with their loved ones in Mexico. It did not involve the planet's largest security system.

"Never should there be a wall between these two great nations, only friendship," Nixon said in 1971. "We hope this wall does not remain here long."

After September 11, 2001, a triple border fence that bisects the park made contact with the other side impossible.

On the 40th anniversary of Friendship Park, activists gathered for a binational celebration. From Tijuana, Los Guayaberos held a salsa dancing lesson that brought Americans and Mexicans to their feet with infectious music.

Once the laughter and swaying of hips ceased, a moment of silence was held for the thousands of migrants who have died while traveling north to work.

Enrique Morones, founder of the civil rights organization Border Angels, said he wanted to celebrate the anniversary of the park since it has always united both communities regardless of the wall separating them.

"We believe friendship has no borders," Morones said.

Friends of Friendship Park is a coalition of individuals and organizations who care about Friendship Park and border issues. They, along with the Border Angels and other activists, are advocating that the park be reopened to allow physical contact between people on each side, its original purpose. Friends of Friendship Park is working with U.S. Homeland

Security officials on a redesign of the park that would allow for cross-border gatherings without compromising security. The plan features a 60-foot retractable gate, which could be opened and closed by the U.S. Border Patrol.

Jamie Gates, a professor at Point Loma Nazarene University and a founder of Friends of Friendship Park, said he wants to see the park restored.

"In the process of building a new fence they really destroyed what has for decades and decades been a place where families gathered," he said.

Congressman Bob Filner, who also participated in the Freedom Rides of 1961, said the park is a place of friendship and a symbol of cooperation between two great nations.

"We have to get rid of this wall so that we can touch, see, dance and sing to each other," said Filner. "When I look towards the U.S. side with my back to the wall, all I see is beauty. The ocean, the people, it's all beautiful. But when I look towards the other side, I see beautiful people and a very ugly wall."

Henry Sanchez Pardo, 41, is a Colombian math professor who is running barefoot from Argentina to

Alaska and planting trees along the way. He planted four small trees in Tijuana two days prior and four more in the binational garden within Friendship Park.

María Luisa Sanchez Meza, president of the Committee on Border Affairs, unveiled a plaque in Tijuana with the park rules in Spanish in order for visitors from the Mexican side to learn about how, when and at what times they can visit loved ones.

"Sometimes not knowing the rules pushes families and friends farther away rather than closer," said Meza. "We hope that this sign, more than just be informative, be a point of family

togetherness and friendship between the two nations. We need to be respectful of the rules and laws so that there is cordiality. This park represents the hope for families to be together."

Basilio Meza Gastelum, a delegate of Playas de Tijuana, said that the contact through the border now does not compared to physical contact.

"Things need to change so that families can truly find each other, not just see each other," Gastelum said.

Filner said before the wall was built families on both sides of the border came to eat and talk together, not try to cross over illegally.

"I want to quote another president in a different context," he said, echoing John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan at the Berlin Wall. "Mr. President, tear down this wall!"

People on both sides of the border should be teaching and learning from each other, Filner said, not being separated by a wall.

Tijuana resident Eva Valladolid spoke tearfully of speaking to her family through the wall at Friendship Park and how it lifts her spirits. She said she hopes the wall will disappear in the future.

Carlos Santos Garcia, 30, said he found his mother at Friendship Park after seven years of not seeing her. In 2007 on Mother's Day, he politely asked a Border Patrol agent if his mother could cross by the ocean to give him a hug.

"He allowed her to come over for five minutes," Garcia said. "We embraced and those five minutes were worth a lifetime."

"Never should there be a wall between these two great nations, only friendship."

**Pat Nixon
Former First Lady**

Activists, families and friends gathered to celebrate
the 40th anniversary of Friendship Park

