

FACULTY + STAFF

Charlene Villaseñor Black is as good as gold as recipient of top faculty prize

Winner of the 2016 Gold Shield Faculty Prize

Wendy Soderburg | July 08, 2016

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Wendy Soderburg/UCLA

Charlene Villaseñor Black trained as a scholar of Spanish baroque art, but also now focuses on the arts of the Spanish colonies and of the contemporary Chicana/o community.

Within the warm, terra-cotta-colored walls of her office in Dodd Hall, Charlene Villaseñor Black has assembled a whimsical mini-museum of Mexican folk art that includes two baby Jesus dolls, a sacred heart painting, a tiny Frida Kahlo chair and a wooden skeleton with moveable arms and legs. In the corner stands a pair of 5-foot-tall zapatistas — revolutionary fighters — made of straw, complete with guns and bullets.

The faceless straw figures — a gift passed down from a colleague who retired — seem to hover protectively over Villaseñor Black as she sits at her desk. But the professor of art history and Chicana/o studies hardly needs protection; if anything, the campus community often finds itself in her wake. Recently, she was named the winner of the [2016 Gold Shield Faculty Prize](#), given by the [Gold Shield Alumnae of UCLA](#) to a mid-career faculty member who has displayed outstanding accomplishments in teaching, research and community service.

“I was shocked when I heard that I had won it, because there are so many amazing colleagues who are eligible for it,” Villaseñor Black said. “It’s a huge honor.”

The Gold Shield Faculty Prize includes a \$30,000 cash award, which will come in handy when the professor travels to Mexico and Cuba (and possibly the Netherlands) for research later this year. The extra money is a luxury she didn’t have 10 years ago; back then, she was a single mom who had to take her young son with her on research trips to Mexico and Spain.

“This will make possible lots of new research for me,” she said of the cash award. “I also have a teaching reduction this next year, so I’m hoping my various books and projects that are in progress will come out.”

Villaseñor Black was nominated for the prize by peers in both of her departments, art history and Chicana/o studies. Initially trained as a scholar of Spanish Baroque art, she expanded her research interests to include the arts of the Spanish colonies and of the contemporary Chicana/o community. According to her colleagues who nominated her, she is “a cutting-edge scholar whose work crosses traditional geographical, chronological and disciplinary boundaries. Her position at UCLA, poised between Latin America and the Pacific Rim, has helped her establish an international reputation as a leading scholar of global networks in the early Iberian world.”

She is also a beloved teacher, as evidenced by the many letters of support she received from graduate and undergraduate students alike. Yve Chavez, a Ph.D. student in art history, got the opportunity to sing with her professor last year when Villaseñor Black invited her to participate in the UCLA Early Music Ensemble’s “Imagining the New World” concert.

“One of the songs selected was the ‘Alabado,’ which Native peoples performed at California’s Franciscan missions beginning in the 18th century,” Chavez said. “The concert stands out as one of my most memorable experiences at UCLA. I not only had the opportunity to write about this historically significant song, but I also sang [it] alongside my talented adviser.”

On campus, Villaseñor Black is a familiar face on the Hill, having served as a faculty-in-residence for the past six years. Her son, Joe, was just 10 when they first moved into Sproul Hall and then later into De Neve’s Holly Ridge building; he’s 17 now and applying for college (including UCLA, of course).

Every November, for the Hill's Day of the Dead celebration, Villaseñor Black enlists students' help in making hundreds of skulls made out of sugar, a beloved tradition in Mexico. She has conducted a program based on the cookbook "Decolonize Your Diet," which emphasizes indigenous, pre-European food such as nopales (prickly pear cactus paddles) and jamaica (tea made from hibiscus flowers). She is also the faculty adviser for Sproul Hall and for the Chican@/Latin@ Studies Community theme floor, which attracted more applicants than any other theme floor on the Hill this year.

Villaseñor Black has also taken on several administrative roles through the years, including her current stint as associate director of the Chicano Studies Research Center. And she's been active in promoting more Chicano/Latino representation at the faculty and administration levels.

Her efforts have not gone unnoticed.

JoAnna Reyes Walton, a UCLA doctoral student in art history, said, "I cannot imagine a professor more worthy of receiving the Gold Shield Faculty Prize than professor Villaseñor Black. She is a passionate educator with a talent for encouraging meaningful dialogue among her students. Though she also holds many administrative responsibilities, professor Villaseñor Black remains accessible to her students, often going beyond the call of duty to advocate for us. Most of all, she is an incredible scholar and an inspiring mentor. The UCLA community is stronger for having her leadership, integrity and acumen. ¡Enhorabuena (congratulations), profesora!"

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