

Genocide forum marks Columbus Day

by [Erica Grimaldo](#), *Outpost Staff*

While others celebrated Christopher Columbus' discovery of America with parades or a day off work, a group of Chicano students from the University of Nevada, Reno held a panel discussion about genocide.

"Our goal was to remember the indigenous people who died [after he landed here], promote dialogue on campus and let people see that there's always two sides to the story," said Ricky Medina, co-president of UNR's MEXA (Movimiento Estudiantil Xicano de Aztlan) chapter, which organized the discussion. The forum, held Oct. 11, was the first public event for the new Chicano student group.



Prof. Petersen described Columbus as a "typical European man of his time."

Photo by Erica Grimaldo.

The forum, titled "500 Years of Cultural and Spiritual Genocide," included panel members Jennifer Ring from the Women's Studies Center, Gerald Petersen and Guillermo Meza from the Foreign Language and Literatures Department and Ron Johnny, chief judge from the Kaibab / Duckwater tribes.

Ring began the discussion talking about the Holocaust as the first modern form of genocide. She then talked about non-lethal threats to cultural diversity and survival. She listed cultural assimilation and interracial marriages as contemporary examples.

Petersen brought the discussion into the American continent by giving audience members some historical background about Columbus and the indigenous civilizations he encountered.

"I think [Columbus] was a typical European man of his time," Petersen said. "He saw Europe as the center of the universe and Christianity as the only valid religion. That's what he brought with him."

Most of the 40 students who attended the event seemed incredulous when Petersen quoted from some of the letters that Columbus and his men wrote back to Spain about the New World.

In one of those letters, Petersen said, Columbus told the Queen that he had publicly taken possession of the island he landed on, which he named San Salvador, and of any other islands bathed by the same sea on which it lay and that "nobody had objected."

Laughs were heard when Petersen went on to explain that nobody recognized the fact that the natives had no idea what the strange looking men in the stranger looking garments were doing.

The Europeans assumed that the people they encountered in the islands didn't have a culture or a language of their own, Petersen said.

"The Spanish wrote the history of the New World and they included myths and ideas they brought with them from the Old World," Petersen said. "The natives undoubtedly knew about their history and religion but nobody bothered to ask them."

Petersen said statistics suggest that about 75 percent of the native population in America died within a few years of the arrival of the Europeans, both from violence and from diseases native people had no defenses against.

Meza agreed with the estimate and said that the term genocide was applicable because "it wasn't just the culture that died, it was the people that died too."

What followed the discovery of America was a period of destruction, reconstruction and assimilation, Meza said. The result was a new people that combined natives and Europeans, he added.

"We need to understand the history and reconcile it with the present to get a balance," Meza said. "In the words of Pablo Neruda: 'They destroyed the culture but they gave us the language.'"



Johnny used the book [The American Indian in the Western Legal System](#) to answer some of the questions from audience members.
Photo by Erica Grimaldo.

The last panel member, Nevada lawyer and tribal chief Ron Johnny, talked about the "bastardization" of international law and how it affected indigenous people, especially in North America.

"Even before Columbus landed back in Spain from his voyage to discover America, the Spanish lawyers were already giving the Pope arguments on why they should keep the lands they had taken possession off back in America," Johnny said.

"[In North America] they used the law because the idea of treaties to be broken was much more economical than trying to conquer the different tribes," he added.

After Johnny concluded the panel member's time to present their side of the topic, audience members took several minutes asking questions ranging from history recaps to contemporary politics.

Ring and Johnny could not reach an agreement regarding the definition of

genocide for an audience member but they did provide several examples illustrating the concept.

After the question and answer segment, about half of the audience members stayed to watch a 20-minute film about Rigoberta Menchu, the Guatemalan human rights activist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.

Medina, MEXA's co-president, said he was satisfied with the knowledge and perspective each panel member brought to the event.

"I was happy with the forum being our first event, now we got something to go from," Medina said.

Sandy Rodriguez, MEXA's advisor, said the group plans to continue organizing cultural and educational events on campus.

"I think that the forum met a need on this college campus to discuss issues that are not on the forefront and perhaps should be," Rodriguez said.

"We've got an obligation as an institution of higher education to discuss our knowledge of what is true and what is not," she added. "It's no secret that history is written by those who conquer."



Sandy Rodriguez, MEXA advisor, participated in the forum's question segment. *Photo by Erica Grimaldo.*

Posted Oct. 13, 1999
Copyright 1999 Nevada Outpost

[TOP](#)

[Outpost](#) | [Metro](#) | [Lifestyle](#) | [Travel](#) | [Dining](#) | [Outdoors](#) | [Sports](#)
[Archives](#) | [Specials](#) | [Links](#) | [About us](#) | [Mail us](#)