



## **Mexica Renaissance**

*By Tom Rippe*

It has been 500 years since Europeans first landed in the New World. At the time the effect on the indigenous population was devastating. Entire populations and cultures were destroyed. Today we think of that as ancient history. But the struggle for indigenous identity that began all those years ago is still going on.

Judith Cuautemoc first began to question her cultural identity back in 1992. That was the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus' voyage. Like many people of indigenous descent, she didn't think the occasion was any cause to celebrate.

"All the governments were planning big celebrations for the so-called discovery. But the indigenous people said 'No, it's not a discovery and we won't accept the celebrations. It's a slap in the face,'" said Cuautemoc.

She was raised in Mexico City by a grandmother who spoke Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica people, who later came to be known as the Aztecs. But from an early age she was taught to be ashamed of her indigenous heritage. "It happened to me what happens to a lot of people here. I heard my grandmother speaking and I said 'Oh, what you talking?' And they told me, my father told me, 'Don't you ever ask what she's talking.' And so I lived with my grandmother but I was not allowed to learn that language."

Cuautemoc said the Mexican government also worked to suppress indigenous identity. "Our people were made to believe we're not indigenous anymore. You couldn't go out on the streets with a hand drum or with a *huehuetzin*, the big drums we have. It was forbidden. The government, they work with the word *mestizo*. So, we are *mestizo*, we are *mestizo*. But no, we are indigenous," she said.

Cuautemoc is now the leader of a dance group called the Cuautemoc Mexica Dancers. In addition to teaching dance, she also teaches Mexica culture and values. "Our most important thing is to make them feel that they are good people, that they can be good members of the community," she said.

While Cuautemoc's group focuses on traditional dance, other groups take other approaches. Manuel Alderete and his group, the Mexica Movement, take a more scholarly approach. They're trying to reconstruct the Mexica identity using manuscripts and other historical evidence. And they're acutely aware of the enormous task ahead of them. "We're not even at the starting line right now of this endeavor. We don't know what our identity is. We don't know what our heritage is. We know in a round-about

way yeah, there were these Indians and they built some pyramids. We're educating our people from square one, actually negative square one, the heritage and history that we've been denied for five centuries," said Alderete.

The Alderete said indigenous people are still suffering from a cultural suppression that hasn't stopped since the time of Columbus. The Mexica Movement practices what it calls educational liberation, attempting to liberate people of indigenous descent by educating them about history and culture. But the movement's efforts aren't focused solely on the descendants of the Mexica. "We want the whole world to know that we're the people of this continent, that we are a people of great achievements in sciences and arts, that this is our land and it's been stolen from us."

Cuautemoc shares Alderete's deep sense of loss. They both feel a profound sense of grief and anger that has not diminished with time. "Even though it happened 500 years ago we're still living the legacy of plundering and thieving and lying. We are in a state of resistance. And we will continue the struggle as long as necessary."