



## New Photographic Exhibits Reveal Truth About Mexico's Indigenous Population

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Centuries of government oppression and the resulting struggles for basic human rights have taken an unfathomable toll on Mexico's indigenous population. The truth, however, about the depths of this suffering and the accurate historical accounts of a people who once ruled this region have often gone untold. While life continues to be anything but easy for the descendants of a once powerful and respected people, nothing has been able to diminish their enduring spirit. And it is this strong will and a life steeped in tradition that allows them to dream of a day when they will once again flourish under their native sun.

Photographer Wesley Billingslea has spent much of the last three years immersed in the rich culture and daily lives of these magnificent people, while also searching for the truth. His resulting work is represented in two unique traveling art exhibitions - *Mexihcah: Keepers of the Fire* and *The Indigenous Council of Oaxaca* - which debut from **February 7 to March 7, 2004** at Self-Help Graphics & Art's Galeria Otra Vez, in Los Angeles, California.

*Mexihcah: Keepers of the Fire* is a collaborative effort between Wesley and the descendants of a people better known to most of the world as the Aztecs. At its heart, the exhibit features his inspirational black and white portraits and documentary-style photographs, many of which vividly depict how tradition plays a significant role in the lives of today's Mexihcah. Combined with handmade artifacts and the poignant text of Maestro Sergio Ocelocoatl Ramirez - a trusted teacher and himself a descendant of Mexico's earliest inhabitants - the exhibit helps reveal the uncensored history of the Mexihcah and the truth about their modern-day fight for freedom.

In June of 2003, generations of unhappiness and hopelessness boiled over for the many indigenous communities of Oaxaca, Mexico. No longer willing to be considered second-class citizens by their government, the people united for a common-cause rally as *The Indigenous Council of Oaxaca*. Thousands of people, their voices uniting as one, publicly demanded solutions to healthcare, housing, employment and education. But most of all they requested respect and a long overdue recognition of their rights. Wesley was in Oaxaca several weeks later for a follow-up protest. The drama that gripped the region during that period was captured in this exhibit's stunning photographs.

Self-Help Graphics & Art was founded in 1973 on the success of the Barrio Mobil Art Studio, a converted van that was used as a portable arts studio, and which provided transportable art classes and workshops to local schools, parks and community centers. Thirty-one years later, it has grown to be the leading visual arts center serving the predominantly Chicano community of Los Angeles.

Opening ceremonies for *Mexihcah: Keepers of the Fire* and *The Indigenous Council of Oaxaca* will be held on, **Saturday, February 7**, 2:30 to 7:00 pm, at Self-Help Graphics & Art, 3802 Cesar Chavez Avenue. The afternoon will begin with a lesson by Maestro Ocelocoatl in Nahuatl, the Mexihcahs' native language, and followed by a Danza presentation, which is their traditional ceremonial dance. The day will conclude with the exhibits opening reception at 5:00 pm.

Wesley will also join Maestro Ocelocoatl and David Ihuipapalli Lopez for a panel discussion on **Thursday, February 12**, 7:00 to 9:00 pm, entitled *Who are the Mexihcahs?*

To mark the twentieth year of the EZLN Foundation and the tenth anniversary of the YA BASTA! Zapatista Movement, the documentary *Zapatistas Chronicle of Rebellion* will be presented on Saturday, February 21, 6:00 to 9:00 pm.

Gallery patrons and members of the news media are encouraged to learn more about the upcoming exhibits and Wesley's other photographic and humanitarian projects by visiting [www.wesleyimages.com](http://www.wesleyimages.com). To find out more about Self-Help Graphics and Art and its long history of serving the Los Angeles community, please visit [www.selfhelpgraphics.com](http://www.selfhelpgraphics.com).

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