

# Willow Glen Resident

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Photograph by Vicki Thompson

**History Preserved:** Wesley Billingslea (middle), a photographer and Willow Glen resident, has spent the last four years photographing and documenting the indigenous populations known as Mexica. Ocelocoati Ramirez ( left), a Mexica and collaborator with Billingslea, is assisted by his translator Ihupapalli (right).

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By Mayra Flores De Marcotte

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## News

To the descendents of the Aztecs, a photograph is more than a piece of paper with an image on it. It is part of their mythology. A photograph that captures the subject's face is believed to also capture the soul. But after hundreds of years, one Willow Glen resident won the ancient people's trust and was allowed to show the public their world through photographs.

"I met a girl in Mexico City," Wesley Billingslea says. "She was a law student as well as a folkloric dancer. After I took her photo, she broke down in tears. It was a sensitive and emotional experience for her as well as myself."

It was the first time anyone had taken her photo, and Billingslea says he has to be careful when choosing the moment and the people he photographs.

"I treat it with a great deal of respect," he says.

This respect, as well as patience, pays off.

"After I took her photograph, she told me that she now feels like I'm her family," he says.

Although the girl in Mexico City was receptive to his photography, others have not been.

"I have photographed people who agreed to be photographed but never looked me in the eye," he says.

A man named Ruben, a traditional drummer, agreed to have his photo taken, but was still uneasy.

"It took me a year to photograph him," Billingslea says. "He was uncomfortable, and I could tell. So I would just go through the motions, point my camera at him and pretend to take the photo. I didn't actually take the photo until two months ago."

Billingslea's patience and the man's growing trust eventually connected.

"By then, he was comfortable with the idea, and his grandmother even came up to me and gave me a hug," he says.

Today's adventure into a culture that believes a picture is a window into the soul began as a child for Billingslea.

As a youngster, he was fascinated with the ancient civilizations of Aztecs, Mayas, Incas and Egyptians.

"Even then, I thought that they were more sophisticated than what the books said," he says. "And from there, everything kind of happened at once. One event led to

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[Briefs](#)

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[Letters](#)

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MAGAZINE

**Steppin' Out**

*Gardening*

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*Neighbors*

[Game pieces get new life in Laurie Elliott's jewelry](#)

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*Business*

another, and it wasn't until the first article was written about us four years ago that I realized what this project meant to others like myself."

His boxing coach, Huitzililn Kuauhminani, first introduced him to the Mexica people and their culture in 1996. The two became close friends and went in search for the truth about the Mexica.

The word *Mexica* (pronounced meh-SHEE-ca), refers to all the indigenous peoples of Mexico. Its pronunciation is one of the many things about the culture that Billingslea is trying to address through his project.

Although the ancient civilization has not been in the public's eye and its existence is doubted by some, there are about five million Mexica left in Mexico. These descendents live together, still practicing their traditions and passing their history on to the next generation by word of mouth. The Mexica speak, read and write *Nahual*, the ancient language of the Aztecs, along with Spanish.

The modern-day Mexica are trying to keep their heritage and language alive as modern life continues to affect their traditions.

Like the girl Billingslea photographed at the university, many Mexica attend college and are professionals in various fields.

After learning about the misconceptions around the Mexica's traditions, beliefs and achievements, Billingslea decided to show the general population the true life and story of the Mexica people through the lens of his camera.

Billingslea is able to interact with people both in Mexico and in San Jose because the Calpulli Huitzilipochotli, a group of about 10 local indigenous families and active dancers, sponsors him. A *calpulli* refers to any family or neighborhood. The Calpulli Huitzilipochotli has a strong influence in Mexico, and its positive recognition has opened many doors for Billingslea.

The Mexica in Mexico allow Billingslea to take pictures of them and their traditional ceremonies because he and the Mexica in San Jose want to educate the public on the Mexica culture. The project is not being done for profit.

## **Purpose to pictures**

Billingslea began working on this particular project, *The Mexica: Keepers of the Fire*, in 2001. It started with photographs of the people he encountered and their traditions and grew into a traveling exhibit with his collaborator, Ocelocoatl Ramirez, that included artwork, traditional dance costumes and painted drums.

The exhibit traveled to Kansas City, Mo., Los Angeles and most recently San Jose.

The project also has book publishers as well as film producers interested in the

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work.

"Life is organic," Billingslea says. "This philosophy helped shape and form the project while allowing for all these possibilities."

Ramirez has been working on educating the public about his ancestors for the last 10 years and was surprised and thankful for meeting and then collaborating with Billingslea.

"To find Wes in our journey, with his sensibility, vision and ability to show this through photos, has put these images at the hands of the public so that they can see themselves in a mirror," Ramirez says.

The *maestro* or teacher, as others involved in the project refer to Ramirez, says Billingslea's photography and the collaboration between the two has been effective.

"These images have walked and traveled to show people of all ages the true Mexica," Ramirez says. "These images are charged with dignity, honor and spirituality because they were made during transcendental opportunities. Wes was able to extract these moments for others to see for ages to come."

Billingslea has traveled to Malinalco, Tepoztlan, Ixcateopan, Chalma and Mexico Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) thus far, and has seen and documented ceremonies that aren't open to the public. At one ceremony he stopped taking pictures about 45 minutes into it because he got the "chills."

As he continues his documentary on this ancient culture, he splits his time between his Willow Glen home and his home in Culiacan, Mexico.

*For more information on Billingslea, his projects and photos, visit [www.wesleyimages.com](http://www.wesleyimages.com).*

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