

## Photos offer window into Salem's Mexican 'sister cities'

By Barbara Curtin

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Most Salem residents would not recognize the names of Las Zarquillas and El Varal, two remote villages in the Mexican state of Michoacán. Thanks to Phil Decker and his camera, that could change.

About 100 of Decker's photographs will hang at the Chemeketa Community College Art Gallery during November in a show called "Las Zarquillas and El Varal, Mexico: Salem's Unofficial Sister Cities." The text for the photos is by Carlos Ruiz, one of Decker's former students from El Varal; Ruiz now is a teacher at West Salem High.

Decker, the principal at Four Corners Elementary School, visited the two towns last spring. Las Zarquillas has just 100 homes and nearby El Varal, just 50.

"The thing that is amazing is that it would be hard to find someone in either that is not connected to Salem," he said. "And there is no sign on the highway that says 'Welcome to Salem's sister city.'"

Decker explored the "sister city" theme in a Statesman Journal photo feature last April. The Chemeketa show will be far more extensive, with about 100 photographs arranged as a virtual tour of the towns.

Decker, who was a documentary photographer before turning to teaching, shot everyday scenes in the villages. Children in school uniforms read their lessons aloud; a woman pats out tortillas by hand; a butcher chops meat in an open-air shop.

One wall will show the El Varal schools that Ruiz and his brothers and sisters attended.

Finally, Decker said, "A large portrait wall at the end will show young and old, boys and girls, men and women looking at you so you get an idea of the diversity of people there."



**Phil Decker | Special to the Statesman Journal**

"Recess" by Phil Decker is part of an exhibit that will show daily life in Las Zarquillas and El Varal, Mexico, at Chemeketa Community College.

### At a glance

What: Las Zarquillas and El Varal, Mexico: Salem's Unofficial Sister Cities

Where: Chemeketa Community College Art Gallery, Building 3, Room 122, 4000 Lancaster Drive NE

When: Wednesday through Nov. 24; usually open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays but call (503) 399-2533 to confirm

Opening: 4:30 to 6 p.m. Wednesday, starting with a panel in Building 3, Room 116, then moving to the art gallery

Learn more: [www.phildeckerphotos.com](http://www.phildeckerphotos.com)

Instead of the usual formal opening reception, four generations of the Ruiz family will talk about their immigrant experiences — starting with Carlos' grandfather, who first came to the United States in the 1940s with the bracero program.

The panel will count as professional development for teachers, who often encounter children from Michoacán. In fact, it's the kickoff for a monthly series that Decker is coordinating on the many cultural groups represented in Salem-Keizer classrooms.

Decker chose Chemeketa rather than a downtown art gallery in hopes that the show would draw a wider audience, including immigrants from Las Zarquillas and El Varal.

He believes the show will give faces to what sometimes can be an anonymous debate about immigration.

"I'm really hoping (visitors) recognize the contributions that members of our Latino community have made to our Salem community, how our members have been intricately linked for many decades," he said.

A second message is that education still is the path to success in America.

"Carlos' parents and grandparents only had a few years of education, but Carlos and his siblings all have college degrees and professions," Decker said. "Having stories of the 'Carloses' in mind can inspire other students, and in addition remind educators that all their kids have great potential."

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