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makers

In life, it's not often that you come across a person who is timeless. You know it instantaneously when you meet them. They are wise. They are satisfied. They exude a calm, self-assured energy, and wish only good onto the world. When you spend time with Maegan Lopez, you quickly realize she is of this rare breed. Read on to hear her story or click on the link below for the latest and greatest media updates from Tucson.

[What's New](#)



Meet Maegan Lopez

On an afternoon in July when most Arizonans were bemoaning the heat (the temperature peaked at 106 degrees), I spoke with a beaming Maegan Lopez - moments after she stepped away from tending to the crops at Mission Garden, where she serves as a Gardener and Cultural Outreach Liaison.

Her joy stemmed from her anticipation of the summer monsoon rains, or what the Tohono O'odham people call "Jukiabig Masad" in Maegan's native language.

“We identify this time of year as the new year because of the saguaro fruit that is blooming and turning into fruit. It’s very important to our culture and our stories of relationship to this place,” she said. “Harvesting the fruit is a whole communal activity... and we know the rain comes after it. It’s almost like a prayer.”

She explained that in the traditional O’odham calendar, the ecological patterns of the Sonoran Desert dictate the seasons, unlike in the Gregorian calendar where seasons are predetermined, regardless of factors occurring in the local environment.

Today, Maegan wholeheartedly embraces the O’odham calendar, knowing that the monsoon rains will determine the harvest of crops, such as her favorite 60-day corn, which will be supplanted this season by Yoeme (Yaqui) Blue Corn at Mission Garden. At the garden, she tends to many of the staples in her diet, such as O’odham squash, which she describes as being capable of feeding “an army with just one”; yellow watermelon, which she refers to as the “food of the gods”; and white tepary beans, which she describes as being “like a teacher” because they’re tied to many of the O’odham culture’s most integral stories.

These crops and countless others are thriving in the living agricultural museum, now called Mission Garden. Warmly referred to as Tucson’s birthplace, it’s situated in the same footprint of the Native American village of S-cuk Son (pronounced Chuk Shon), a place sacred to the Tohono O’odham and the site of a historic garden that was maintained by Maegan’s ancestors.

“We call Mission Garden a memory garden because it has the ability to saturate with these memories,” Maegan said. “It’s like we’re going back to a place we had forgotten.”



Maegan recalls the first time she visited the young garden in 2018, and how the more she explored the grounds, the more entranced she became. The garden reminded her of the innocence of her childhood, when she spent most days with her grandfather, a man she describes as the reason why she is the person she is today.

“He had a hat that he always wore that said: ‘life is good.’” Maegan said, smiling broadly. “He had a great sense of humor, and he taught me to laugh and be silly. He taught me to be an observer, not be a talker or a shocker. Though he has passed, with all the things that have happened and continue to happen, he has always brought a little balance to the anxieties I carry.”

As a child, Maegan spent many days with her grandfather tending to his extensive garden in the small community of New Fields, Arizona, on the Tohono O'odham Nation near the U.S./Mexico border.

Upon visiting Mission Garden for the first time, it was as if she was reliving those memories, and she found herself wanting “that feeling over and over again.” What began as an occasional volunteering opportunity with her sister turned into a much more regular occurrence, in which Maegan visited Mission Garden with everyone in her personal circle, including her now 17-year-old son, as well as by herself.

That summer, when the garden's Curator of Collections went out of town, Maegan went to the garden every day after work to water and tend to the plants. The arrangement worked out so well, a job offer soon ensued.

In retrospect, she says, that life-changing moment allowed her to realize her life's passion.

“Everything at Mission Garden has a way of sharing something with you, especially if you are interacting with a plant and you know nothing about it. Someone will come by and share something with you and it's like you're peering through a window and maybe you even climb through the window,” Maegan said. “The intricate relationships that are developed with each person who walks through the garden and the knowledge that's shared, it's something to be celebrated.”

Mission Garden's 11 individual gardens (with four more underway) serve as a timeline of the various cultures that have lived in and influenced Tucson, a UNESCO City of Gastronomy, over the past 4,000 years. Visitors can weave through the indigenous gardens, which include the Hohokam, O'odham before European contact, O'odham after European contact, and Yoeme gardens, before exploring a multitude of other gardens, including the Spanish, Mexican,

Chinese, and Africa in the Americas gardens. The various cultures are celebrated during events throughout the year, like Día de San Juan, Agave Heritage Festival and Chinese New Year, when people of all different backgrounds “stand shoulder-to-shoulder,” Maegan said.

“There’s a built-in plant relationship at the garden that we have a lot to learn from as people,” Maegan said. “All of these beautiful tastes and sustenance that blend together, they complement each other in a really beautiful way.”



Maegan, who holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Family Studies and Human Development from the University of Arizona, has long been an advocate for change for her people. She’s worked on the O’odham Nation in

diabetes prevention management and behavioral health, as well as in Tucson in special education at a bicultural high school designed for all Native Nations.

But unlike other social activists, she doesn't seem restless, as if there aren't enough hours in the day to accomplish the laundry list of items that need to be done. Instead, she seems very much contented, joyful even, as she talks about her goals to reintroduce native foods to people in her community to "change the food culture back to the way it was."

In November 2021, Maegan and Mission Garden spearheaded a program called the Indigenous Food Challenge, in conjunction with other indigenous food organizations like Ramona Farms and the Ajo CSA. The program provided 25 participants from the Tohono O'odham nation with a 31-day supply of indigenous foods coupled with instructions on how to prepare them. The goal was to observe how people's health changed over the course of the program, which was timed in accordance with two major holidays on the Nation: Thanksgiving and the St. Francis Feast. Though the program was met with many challenges due to the lingering effects of the pandemic, Maegan says at least one person reported that the modifications to her diet positively impacted her blood sugar levels.

"I was reminded through this program that it does work," Maegan said. "If you stick with it, you can change your health throughout your entire life. I can encourage people to taste and try. Little by little it does bring about change."

Maegan says there are discussions underway for additional iterations of the Indigenous Food Challenge, and she's confident the program will return.

"Having a child, having a son, I feel a responsibility to pass this on," Maegan said.

In the future, she also hopes to take what she's learned at Mission Garden and

apply it to the plot of land on the Tohono O’odham Nation she inherited from her grandparents when they passed. The garden that is the subject of her childhood memories has ceased to exist, so like with Mission Garden, she plans to use the same footprint and start anew.

“I used to be like everyone else. I used to say, ‘ah the wind, ah it’s hot.’ I would feel antsy or unsettled,” Maegan said. “Now when the seasons change, I remember that we can start collecting mesquite beans or we can start putting seed in the ground. I see with new eyes how much beauty we have, and how much the Sonoran Desert has to offer.”

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