Ex-president may be gone, but he refuses to be forgotten

by S. Lynne Walker

SAN CRISTOBAL, Mexico - Vicente Fox may be gone from office, but the former president of Mexico is making sure he won't be forgotten.

MEXFOX - Alvaro Castillo, 27, welds the foundation for the presidential library and museum former Mexican President Vicente Fox is building on his family ranch in San Cristobal, Guanajuato. Fox plans to open the first phase of the library and museum on July 2, the anniversary of his historic election to the presidency. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

MEXFOX - Former Mexican President Vicente Fox stood next to a saddle in his office at Los Pinos in Mexico City, the Mexican equivalent of the White House, before leaving office. Fox is building a presidential library and museum on his ranch in Guanajuato, where he will display gifts he received from world leaders during his six years in office. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

MEXFOX - At former President Vicente Fox's ranch in San Cristobal, Guanajuato, workers pour the foundation Mexico's first presidential library and museum. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

MEXFOX - A donkey-pulled cart lumbers along the cobblestone street of San Cristobal, Guanajuato, where former Mexican President Vicente Fox lives on his family ranch. The 3,000-person town of San Cristobal could become an international tourist destination once Fox open his presidential library and museum. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

MEXFOX - During his six-year term, former Mexican President Vicente Fox signed autographs, kissed babies and shook hands with hundreds of well-wishers in the plaza of San Cristobal, Guanajuato, the pueblo where his family ranch is located and where he is now building a presidential library and museum. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

MEXFOX - A sculpture of former Mexican President Vicente Fox's trademark victory sign stands in the plaza of San Cristobal, Guanajuato where he is now building a presidential library and museum. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

MEXFOX - Former Mexican President Vicente Fox with well-wishers in the plaza of San Cristobal, Guanajuato. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

After making history as the leader who brought democracy to Mexico, Fox is breaking ground again - this time with a presidential library and museum on his family's broccoli farm.

While presidential libraries are common in the United States, Mexico has never had such a monument - or anything like the 12 official libraries built in the United States since 1939, when Franklin D. Roosevelt donated part of his estate for the nation's first presidential library.

Fox began planning his project long before his term ended. In November, his wife, Marta Sahagun submitted blueprints and filed the request for building permits for a presidential library modeled after the William J. Clinton Library in Little Rock, Ark.

The privately funded Vicente Fox Center, which will contain 4.5 million presidential documents and 15,000 hours of videos from Fox's six years in office, will give Mexicans an unprecedented look inside the presidency.

Until Fox's historic victory in 2000, Mexico was ruled by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI. During 71 years of PRI rule, Mexicans got little or no information about the inner workings of their government.

Fox, in contrast, has said he will include all the papers and letters from his administration - and he won't try to cast a favorable light on his term by eliminating controversial material.

The idea of a Fox presidential library is intriguing to some, outrageous to others.

"He is going to share his presidency with the Mexican people," said Antonio Garcia, mayor of San Francisco del Rincon, the municipality that houses Fox's pueblo of San Cristobal. "We are going to see the president's agenda, what he did every day. We are going to see the gifts he received as president. It's history and it belongs to the Mexican people."

But others see the project as a monument to Fox's ego.

"Fox was a flop as president," said George Grayson, a Mexico scholar at the College of William & Mary. "If it were Lazaro Cardenas, or even if were Ernesto Zedillo, or other presidents who have left office well regarded, their doing it would appear justifiable.

"But in terms of Fox, what's there tocelebrate?"

Since Fox left office, he has drawn hecklers in Los Angeles. In Washington, D.C., he rankled Mexicans with remarks last year's controversial presidential election, which gave Felipe Calderon, from Fox's National Action Party, a scant 0.56 percent win over leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

His role in bringing democracy to Mexico has drawn praise from other quarters.

In San Diego, he will be honored on April 25 at a fundraiser and dinner hosted by the Institute of the Americas, which will give him its Award for Democracy and Peace.

The honor is given to Latin American leaders who have made a contribution to strengthen democracy, said Jeffrey Davidow, who served as U.S. ambassador to Mexico during part of Fox's term and who is now president of the institute.

The award has been given only 11 times since 1987, with former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo among those honored.

"We're aware that Fox has been criticized in Mexico and elsewhere," Davidow said. "But there's no question in our minds that his election in 2000, and the way that he conducted himself in office - eliminating a lot of the aspects of presidential power and reinforcing institutions in Mexico - made Mexico a stronger place and helped the country withstand the challenges after the past election."

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In San Cristobal, workers are already laying the foundation for Fox's legacy.

There is an urgency about their work, because Fox hopes to open the library on July 2, a particularly symbolic day because it is his birthday, his wedding anniversary and the anniversary of his election to the presidency.

Last month (January), he invited Garcia, Guanajuato Gov. Juan Manuel Oliva and other state and local officials to his ranch house in San Cristobal to hear his plans. To get there, they drove on a two-lane road cutting through dry fields sprouting tangled weeds to the pueblo of 3,000 people.

Then, they rode along San Cristobal's cobblestone streets, where farmers still drive wooden carts pulled by donkeys. They passed the tiny plaza where Fox played soccer as a boy, and the small stone church where he and his wife often attend Sunday Mass.

When they reached the house, Garcia said they were greeted by Fox, dressed in his trademark blue shirt, blue jeans and cowboy boots. Sahagun was there, too, talking about the library as she offered coffee and cookies.

Fox showed them a scale model of a sprawling, single-story museum atop a basement library filled with digitalized documents.

His plans include an exhibition hall with rotating exhibits, not only from Mexico, but from other countries. He will also display many of the gifts he received from world leaders, gifts like the cowboy boots from

Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Fox talked about creating a center for the study of democratic experiences in Mexico and throughout the world modeled. He plans to participate in some of the sessions, which he hopes will be attended by world leaders.

"He was full of enthusiasm, with dreams, with projects, with his wife at his side," said Juan Alcocer, director of the state Cultural Institute, who attended the meeting. "He looked satisfied, just like always."

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Fox's idea of opening the inner workings of his government to public scrutiny is intriguing to scholars and academics and political analysts.

"The important thing is that it not become simply a museum of the person, but a documentation center of the decisions made during that term," said Luis Rubio, who heads a prestigious think tank in Mexico City. "In this country, there is not even an obligation to keep documents, so the notion of having a presidential library is to be applauded," Rubio said. "It will be a fantastic experiment if it's substantive."

Fox and his staff won't talk publicly about the library. But after six years in Mexico's presidency, he apparently isn't discouraged by the negative publicity.

"In a conservative society like ours, anything new provokes criticism," said a Fox associate involved with the library project. "But it is not costing the country anything. The ex-president is doing Mexican society a service. With time, people will understand the importance of this library."

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