



DELICIA LOPEZ/STAFF

Gabriela Sandoval has developed a passion for mariachi music.

Embracing a mariachi education

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It's easy to choose a college when you know you want to be an architect or a veterinarian. But what if you want to be a mariachi?

Mariachi musician Gabriela Sandoval of San Antonio, who joyfully calls the traditional Mexican folk music her "life's passion," has the answer. After graduating from Jefferson High School, she enrolled in what many consider the No. 1 college mariachi program — the University of Texas Pan American in Edinburg.

Why such passion for mariachi music?

"It's really tough when you talk with outside people about it," says the 22-year-old senior music major, who plays harp in the school's 17-member mariachi group. "It's a beautiful way to look at your culture and heritage. You are storytellers of

See MARIACHI/10D



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The string section of the University of Texas Pan American mariachi group rehearses for this weekend's Mariachi Extravaganza.

Mariachi students dispel stereotypes

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the past; you're keeping it alive."

The Pan Am group will participate in the Mariachi Extravaganza this weekend, along with 15 other university mariachis and 35 high school groups. The three-day event also includes performances by Los Arrieros of El Paso and Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, considered the finest mariachi in the world.

"The group here (at Pan Am) sounds better than the professional groups I've heard," says Ruffino Menjares, 26, who plays Spanish guitar in the Pan Am band.

Menjares, from Corpus Christi, is one of Sandoval's "recruits," a list which also includes trumpeter Fernando Aguilar and violinist Ruth Vera of San Antonio.

"I recruited some people from the area who had never really liked the music, but now they're enjoying it," Sandoval says.

Although her friends might consider Sandoval an evangelical mariachi, she wasn't born with the spirit. But one of her older sisters, Ana, is a mariachi violinist.

"I never really wanted to get into it," says Sandoval. "But my mom pushed me because of my sister."

In 1996, she got to study one-to-one with Mariachi Vargas harp player Julio Martinez Angeles, and by her senior year in high school, Sandoval definitely "was into it." That year, while watching a performance of the UT-Pan Am mariachi band, she became enthralled.

Rhythmically infectious, mariachi music ranges from traditional sixth-eighths time and three-quarter time *sons* and romantic *balladas* to pop such as "New York, New York" and "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You."



Arturo Pasalagua directs the mariachi group at UT Pan American, considered the premier school for mariachi music.

ereotype that mariachis are four fat guys playing a cantina somewhere, that they're really capable musicians," he said.

Vera, 23, was born in Mexico "so I'm much more familiar with that music than hip-hop or rock." She began playing violin in sixth grade at Irving Middle School, eventually graduating from Fox Tech.

Dahlia Guerra, director of UT-Pan Am's Department of Music, started the mariachi program in Edinburg in 1989.

"The music itself is very beautiful. Of course, the cultural part of it, the move toward promoting the heritage and pride in culture, is attractive to students," says Guerra.

Her department of 150 music majors promotes "all different styles of music."

"Mariachi is a little more accepted today, and the level of musicianship has improved," she says. "We're really the musical ambassadors for the university."

The three-day Mariachi Extravaganza includes workshops on Friday. All events are at Municipal Auditorium. Admission is free. Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlan and Los Arrieros...