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Scholar to kickoff Hispanic Heritage Month celebrations

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By Clark Curtis, For the **Washington Daily** News

The assistant professor of African American History at The Ohio State University, Dr. María Ester Hammack, will kick off the National Hispanic Heritage Month celebrations here in **Washington**. Hammack, a native of northwest Mexico, and a graduate from ECU where she received her bachelors and masters degrees, calls eastern North Carolina her second home. Her primary focus in her teachings is to shed light on some of the omissions of stories of the Underground Railroad. "We often talk about how the Underground Railroad led freedom seekers north to Canada," said Dr. Hammack. "But when talking about the Underground Railroad we have to ensure that we also speak about the thousands of freedom seekers who fled south to Mexico in search of safe havens."

During her talk at the Turnage Theatre, Dr. Hammack will focus on some of the stories of the Black Americans who chose to go south to Mexico, particularly, the stories of the Black women who played a vital role in the Underground Railroad and the liberation of Blacks. "All too often when we speak of the Underground Railroad we focus on and highlight the stories of the men," said Dr. Hammack. "I want to highlight the women who have been overlooked and who were foundational actors in shaping the Underground Railroad, which I prefer to call the Channels of Liberation, that lead to safe havens in Mexico. And how these freedom seekers navigated this elaborate network with the help of Mexicans and indigenous populations along the way. I will highlight the stories of two enslaved women in Wake County who reached Mexico safely in 1820."

Dr. Hammack welcomes this opportunity to share these stories and bring new light to a part of our history. "National Historic Heritage Month is a celebration of freedom and independence across the Americas," said Dr. Hammack. "Independence would not have been possible in Mexico without the efforts of Black Mexicans, whose ancestors were first brought to the country as enslaved people from West Africa in the 1500s by Spain. By the early 1800s the majority of Black Mexicans were freed. And it was because of those efforts that freedom seekers in the US headed south to where

they could claim their freedom, obtain land, and become citizens once they set foot on Mexican soil. And knowing that once there, they could never be taken back to the US by slave hunters."

It is Dr. Hammocks' hope that by learning about what she calls this "erased history" we will be better able to address racism. "By learning the untold stories of those freedom seekers who made their way to Mexico and Canada, it can help us to address and challenge anti-Blackness across the US," said Dr. Hammack. "I know it is an ambitious goal, but hopefully through knowledge, some will be empowered to keep learning, digging, and uncovering these stories."

Dr. Hammocks' talk will begin at 11 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 7, at the Turnage Theatre, and is co-sponsored by the **Washington** Waterfront Underground Museum and the Arts of the Pamlico, recipients of a Blue Cross Blue Shield grant to initiate their Building Integrated Cities Hispanic/**Latino** Outreach Campaign.

"The Beaufort County Arts Council is excited to host Dr. Hammack's talk on Saturday morning" said Bronté Labbé, Visual Arts and Marketing Director, Beaufort County Arts Council. "Hispanic Heritage Month is a time for learning and expanding our understanding of the history, cultures, and people we are celebrating. We are so fortunate to be able to hear from Dr. Hammack about a part of history often overlooked."

The inaugural Hispanic Heritage Month Festival will be held on Oct. 7 from 3 p.m.-7 p.m. at Festival Park. It will include opening comments from Mayor Sadler, food trucks, activities for kids, community partners, dancers, and a special live performance by Raices Mexicanas Mariachi. "This is an event that our director of Public Works, Stacy Drakeford, has had in mind for about three years now," said Abigail Cabrera, Latin Community Outreach and Language Access Coordinator with the City of **Washington**. "It something that he has always dreamed of having for the growing **Latino** community."

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