

# Cultural House Report 2008

## Spanish House

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## 1 Overview

La Casa Castellana, more commonly known as Spanish House, is one of the five cultural houses on MIT's campus, located in the dormitory New House. La Casa was originally formed in 1979 in order to establish an environment for students to practice the Spanish language and enjoy the food and culture of members' countries and to provide a brotherhood between all Hispanic, Spanish-speaking ethnic groups. As a house, we participate in many different activities throughout the school year; we host events and social gatherings, take house trips, and work on building a strong community within the house. Overall, we provide a safe, comfortable, and supportive environment for Hispanic students and those interested in the Hispanic culture.

During the semester, Spanish House members take turns preparing dinner for the rest of the residents. Dinners take place at 6 PM in the Spanish House dining area, every day preceding a day of class (usually Sunday thru Thursday). This is more than just food, though; it offers Spanish House members a time to connect and build community. Since the majority of the residents attend dinners, this is a great time to conduct meetings and have guest speakers, such as Karina Vielma, Assistant Dean in the Office of Minority Education and Spanish House Freshmen Advisor. We also engaged all dinner attendees in spoken word performance of short plays written by Ms. Suzan-Lori Parks. Every evening, a couple of Spanish House members would stand up in front of the rest of the dinner guests and perform a play from the book *365 Days/365 Plays*. Not only did this engage the membership, but it also educated the Spanish House community about Ms. Park's work before her visit on campus in the middle of the Spring semester. Finally, La Casa hosts weekly study breaks that all house members and social members are welcome to attend.

The social atmosphere of La Casa Castellana is *very* open, much more so than that in other dorms at MIT. Residents' doors are always open if they are in the room and house members socialize in the lounges and in the downstairs kitchen and dining areas. Most people in the house are friends and many are very close with one another. The rules and customs of the house facilitate a friendly atmosphere in which house members interact with each other quite frequently.

## 2 Events and Initiatives

Spanish House hosts a number of events throught the year. The following is a high level account of the most important ones held in the year 2007.

### 2.1 Fall 2007

The events organized by Spanish House in the Fall 2007 semester are listed below in reverse chronological order.

### **2.1.1 Final Dinner (December 14, 2007)**

On December 14, Spanish House held its annual Final Dinner in our dining area. This is one of the largest events Spanish House holds every year. It provides an opportunity for members to share a night of good food after the Fall semester is finally over, and also includes a gift exchange, elections, and a party. This year, every member, including social members, had a job for this successful event. With residents, social members, and friends of Spanish House, the number of attendees for the night was over fifty people. The following assignments were given: cooking, shopping, set-up, clean-up, and decorations.

**Cooking** The Spanish House kitchen saw traffic from 11 AM to 7 PM as the cooking team had the task of preparing enough delicious food for fifty people. The menu for that night included two turkeys and one ham as the entrée, as well as salad, cooked vegetables, bread, macaroni & cheese, stuffing, and mashed potatoes as sides, with apple pie, tres leches cake, and polvoron cookies for dessert. Everything was home-cooked and scrumptious.

**Shopping** The shopping team was in charge of buying the food required for dinner.

**Set-Up** Set-up was in charge of setting the tables, taking the food to the dining area, and storing leftovers.

**Clean-Up** An extremely important job, clean-up was in charge of washing dishes and cooking utensils used to prepare the dinner, as well as cleaning up the dining area after the dinner.

**Decorations** The decorations team proved their creativity and good taste at Final Dinner. A Christmas tree, hanging snow flakes, and table center pieces set the mood for the special night.

That night officers for the 2008 year were also elected. After dinner and the elections, members received gifts from their "Secret Santa," another Spanish House tradition. It was a spectacular evening thanks to the work of all the Spanish House members.

Although the event as a whole was a success, there were some setbacks. As usual, the food was ready later than planned, but the delay was less than what we experienced previous years. More importantly, the elections were a bit disorganized. This was because most guests and seniors did not seem to be too interested in them.

### **2.1.2 LUCHA-Spanish House White-Out Party (December 8, 2007)**

This night, La Unión Chicana por Aztlán (LUChA) and Spanish House teamed up to bring both a social event and a fundraiser for LUChA. The event, which took place at Spanish House, was aimed at allowing people to come together and have fun prior to the stress of finals week at MIT. Furthermore, LUChA members set up a hot dog and snacks stand in Spanish House; the proceeds went towards funding LUChA's spring

break community service project in Mexico, where they will be helping an orphanage. The party was a success and a considerable amount of money was collected through the fundraiser.

### **2.1.3 Holiday Open House (December 2, 2007)**

As always, the Holiday Open House for 2007 was organized by the Housemasters and the New House Executive Board. Spanish House contributed to the event by preparing a traditional dessert served during the winter holidays. Members of the house got together to make delicious buñuelos from scratch and Mexican hot chocolate. They were so popular that they were gone within five minutes of the beginning of the event. The house was complimented for their successful contribution, the only negative feedback being that more ought to have been made.

### **2.1.4 Salsa Night at McGregor (November 30, 2007)**

The salsa night event consisted of salsa lessons taught by members of MIT's Casino Rueda Group and then followed by free dancing with a mix of bachata, merengue, and salsa music. The purpose of the event was to showcase and promote Spanish dancing culture to the MIT community. The event was a success in that about half of the attendees were students from outside of the Latino community. The event was also used as a fundraising tool for future events, since Spanish House charged a small participation fee. The event was targeted towards the New House and McGregor dormitories, but stronger support with advertisement could increase the potential of events of this sort in the future.

### **2.1.5 House trip to Yogi Bear Park (November 11, 2007)**

Spanish House has a house trip every semester, which all of the Spanish House full and social members are welcome to attend. This semester, we chose to spend a relaxing day at the Yogi Bear Park in southern Massachusetts. The purpose of the trip was to relax and unite all of the associated members of the house. It was a bonding experience and a way to escape from the hassels and worries of MIT. We participated in hikes around the park, soccer in the open areas, and a nice campfire with food and stories. It gave the freshmen and new members of the house an opportunity to know the upperclassmen of the house.

### **2.1.6 Día de los Muertos Celebration (November 2, 2007)**

Día de los Muertos is a traditional Mexican holiday where people both remember and celebrate loved ones who have passed away. Family is quite central in Latino culture and it was through a Día de los Muertos celebration which took place on November that Spanish House and LUCHA celebrated their lost family members as well as their newer secondary families at MIT. The venue was decorated with traditional skulls, an altar, and pictures of those who we had lost. It was a warm event which allowed us to come together not to mourn but to celebrate lives.

### **2.1.7 Study break with the Brothers of Chocolate City and New House Housemasters (October 24, 2007)**

The GRT's of Chocolate City and Spanish House decided to co-host a study break for the purpose of promoting stronger bonds between Spanish House members and the Brothers of Chocolate City and having the Housemasters speak on the issue of the duties of theme-based houses. The study break was extremely successful with attendance of over forty people and plenty of mingling between members of the two living groups.

### **2.1.8 Movie Night (September 24, 2007)**

Spanish House hosts movie nights every semester. For the Fall 2007 semester, we showed the inspirational film "Stand and Deliver." The movies are projected in the Spanish House dining area, and refreshments are provided for attendees. Attendance to this event was low this time, mostly due to a lack of advertisement. This has been a recurring problem for these movie nights because of the legal issues involved in advertising a movie showing without owning its rights. Each event of this sort needs to provide a strong educational component, such as a presentation by faculty that relates to the movie, but this is often hard to find.

### **2.1.9 REX (August 25-28, 2007)**

This REX was extremely successful. The new freshmen members of the house had a lot of house pride and encouraged all of their Interphase peers to attend most of the events. It was a great having such a close knit group of students that felt so strongly about where they lived. Since we have RBA, our main focus is to welcome the new freshmen and to encourage other students to become social members of the house. The following is a breakdown of the main events organized by Spanish House during REX.

**Salsa Night and Dance Party (August 25)** This event allowed the members of Spanish house to get together and contribute to the further education of the Spanish culture among the rest of the MIT community. The dance party allowed the members of Spanish house to get to know the incoming freshmen on a social level. This encouraged people to come to Spanish House more frequently and to eventually become social members of the house. This event had very high attendance and definitely provided a night of fun for all involved.

**Ice Cream Social (August 26)** House members mingled over customized sundaes. All present upperclassmen as well as most of the new members were able to get to know one another and talk about their experiences at MIT.

**Tour of Boston (August 27)** This event was planned but never took place. The only people willing to go were the upperclassmen of the house along with the house GRT. The rest of the new freshmen were either tired from the math diagnostic that took place earlier that day or busy with other orientation activities. This

event should be better coordinated with the freshmen orientation schedule and maybe later on in the year at the beginning of the semester to encourage more active participation within the house. We still feel it is a good event for students unfamiliar with the Boston area.

**Game Night (August 27)** This event was *extremely* successful. There was an entire night full of Pictionary, video games, and other board games. This was truly a fun and bonding experience and we could not get people to leave. It definitely went over the scheduled time but it was so much fun that nobody seemed to mind.

**Carne Asada (August 28)** This was another successful event with around fifty people in attendance. It was the only free food event of the day so many of the freshmen were eager to attend. There were people playing soccer and enjoying a wonderful Summer day. The food was a bit late due to technical difficulties with the grill. One of the incoming freshmen even helped with this event, which demonstrated his bond to the house. We had just enough to feed all of the people in attendance.

## 2.2 Spring 2007

The events organized by Spanish House in the Spring 2007 semester are listed below in reverse chronological order.

### 2.2.1 Final Dinner at Jae's (May 17, 2007)

At the end of the spring semester, Spanish House usually hosts a final dinner and graduating seniors are presented with a farewell gift from the house. For the Spring 2007 semester, instead of having a traditional meal at the house, the member body voted to eat out for the special occasion. We chose the restaurant Jae's and after a delicious dinner, we presented each of the seniors with a personalized gift. The event was a great success as almost the entire house attended the dinner and the graduating seniors really loved their presents.

### 2.2.2 Tower of Babel (April 28, 2007)

Tower of Babel is a big event hosted by all of the Cultural Houses and open to the entire MIT community. The party is a celebration of the Cultural House spirit and offers a chance for each of these communities to present themselves to the rest of the MIT student body. In the past, it has taken place in New House 6, where each Cultural House was in charge of setting up a floor with food and decorations. The first floor lounge is reserved for dancing and refreshments with music provided by a DJ.

This event was cancelled in 2005 and in 2006 the format was changed. Unfortunately, for 2007, the Tower of Babel fell short of expectations. Many of the representatives from the other Cultural Houses did not show up to organize the food and music and the little food that was provided was consumed very quickly. In the

future, to make the event more successful, better communication among the participating living groups should be a priority. If representatives from each Cultural House are assigned specific duties, then they can be held accountable if those tasks are not completed. We hope that in the future we can work together with the other Cultural Houses in order to increase the effectiveness and attendance of this event.

### **2.2.3 Movie Night (April 22, 2007)**

Spanish House hosts movie nights every semester. For the Spring 2007 semester, we showed the politically-charged film "Machuca." The movies are projected in the Spanish House dining area, and refreshments are provided for attendees. For this occasion, we had our GRT give a brief presentation about the movie and its historical and political context. It was very interesting and enlightening experience, especially because our GRT lived through the events portrayed in the movie, and was thus able to provide very lively descriptions and explanations of the events we saw.

### **2.2.4 Study break with the Brothers of Chocolate City (April 19, 2007)**

The GRT's of Chocolate City and Spanish House decided to co-host a study break for the purpose of promoting stronger bonds between Spanish House members and the Brothers of Chocolate City. The study break was extremely successful with attendance of over forty people and plenty of mingling between members of the two living groups.

### **2.2.5 Campus Preview Weekend events (April 12-15, 2007)**

Following is a breakdown of the main events hosted by Spanish House during CPW 2007.

**Tropical Study Break (April 12)** There was a great turn out for this tropical themed study break. We even underestimated the number of people that would potentially attend the event. The theme for the study break was intended to incorporate the various cultures of the Caribbean. This event was not carried out exactly as planned but the amount of support from the members of the house contributed to the success of the event.

**Salsa Lessons (April 13)** This was our way of showing how we as a Cultural House contribute to the greater New House community. We held salsa lessons to educate others on one form of dance and how some Latino cultures express themselves. There was a good number of people at this event, yet the ratio of student teachers to participants remained high.

**Carne Asada (April 14)** We held a Carne Asada event to demonstrate the Mexican culture at our cookout. There was a poor turnout at this event. We expected somewhere around 60 participants and only had a turn out of about 20 or so people. This was due in part to a Boston Intercollegiate Conference that was held that same day and at the same time. Next time, a more careful look should be taken at other concurrent events to avoid problems of this sort.



**Game Night (April 14)** We also held a Game Night and played board games that night. We had appetizers and snacks as refreshments for the event. This was a good event and the participants really enjoyed themselves.

**Breakfast (April 15)** This a breakfast held be the members of the Spanish House community. We cooked for the freshmen before they embarked on their journey home. It was a good bonding experience between the members of the house since they had to cook together, as well as for the prospective freshmen as we convince them that MIT is the right choice for them. We had a good number of pre-frosh in attendance and it was overall a good event.

### **2.2.6 Mes Latino participation (March 2007)**

Spanish House hosted a series of events leading up and into Mes Latino 2007, a month-long celebration of Latino culture, history, and heritage at MIT. We decided to host the Afro-Latina author Coco Fusco since she was an artist-in-residence on campus for the Spring 2007 semester. On February 28 and March 7, Spanish House co-hosted a film in discussion with the Brothers of Chocolate City. The first event was hosted in the third floor lounge of Chocolate City and the second event took place in the Spanish House dining area. We viewed a film on the life and accomplishments of the political activist Angela Davis and also a documentary of the performing work of Coco Fusco herself. Finally, for our last event, we brought Coco Fusco to speak at New House (in the House 4 study lounge). She discussed her work, issues of race and identity in today's changing society, and issues surrounding mixed race. This was of particular importance for us since many people in Spanish House are of mixed descent.

These three events were heavily publicized by both Spanish House and Chocolate City. Flyers were poster both throughout New House and on campus and e-mails were sent out to all the dorms. Each event saw an attendance of about thirty to forty people, with about ten to fifteen people who were not a part of either living group. Refreshments were served at all three events and the participants engaged in discussion.

Another event held during Mes Latino was the LUCHA-APR post-game gathering. Every year, LUCHA and the Association of Puerto Ricans (APR) come together for a basketball showdown. The last basketball game took place on Saturday, March 17. Although APR took the victory that day, there were no hard feelings as the LUCHA-APR official after-party took place in Spanish House that night. At the party, people recapped the close game and worked out their difference on the dance floor. It was a successful event whose location was key in bringing people together to celebrate an annual event.

## **2.3 Other events**

Not only does Spanish House organize its own events, but we also serve as a sort of hub for many other Latino and Hispanic culture related groups. This is one of the most important roles of Spanish House. Indeed, many of our members are part

of the executive boards of groups such as Casino Rueda, Mujeres Latinas, the Latino Cultural Center (LCC), and the Mexican-American Engineering Society (MAES). Moreover, our members also actively participate in other groups, such as the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE), La Unión Chicana por Aztlán (LUChA), Association of Puerto Ricans (APR), Venezuelans at MIT (VENSAMIT), and Hombres Latinos. As expected, being at Spanish House offers the leaders of these groups an opportunity to network and work together. Many of the events organized by these groups have used Spanish House's kitchen, dining area, or other facilities. In addition to the joint events already described, below is a short list describing a few of the events held by these groups with the aid of Spanish House.

### **2.3.1 Pozole (December 8, 2007)**

Both the missions of Spanish House and LUChA seek to preserve Latino culture in some way or another. As a result, every year LUChA cooks a traditional Mexican soup (pozole) and the preparation and dining generally occur at Spanish House. This past December, LUChA members as well as Spanish House members came together to make this annual event happen. The Spanish House kitchen is a great resource for some of LUChA's events which require storing and cooking food. Setup for this event began early at 10 AM and the soup was served at 1 PM. The attendance of both Spanish House and LUChA members indicated that the event was surely a success in celebrating Latino heritage.

### **2.3.2 September 16 Celebration (September 15, 2007)**

The balance of the social and academic is a priority for both Spanish House and LUChA. On this night, LUChA held their first party of the Fall 2007 semester at Spanish House, to celebrate the Mexican Independence Day and the Mexican tradition of "El Grito." This event was a tremendous success which could not have happened without the strong LUChA publicity and the key location of Spanish House. Not only were many MIT students of diverse backgrounds in attendance, but students from various neighboring schools in Boston were drawn in for a night of fun.

### **2.3.3 Mujeres Latinas Annual Bake-Off (March 11, 2007)**

For the fourth consecutive year, the Spanish House kitchen and dining areas were the venue for the Mujeres Latinas Annual Bake-Off. The event is part of Mes Latino, a month long celebration sponsored by various Hispanic organizations on campus. The event brought together over ten delicious entries, and even more judges, including the Spanish House GRT. Although the event was organized to celebrate the Hispanic community, it brought together men and women of all cultural backgrounds. The recipes varied from classic favorites like chocolate chip cookies to innovative takes on traditional Latino cuisine. It was an event in which collaboration, education, and exploration all took place, with some wonderful baked goods nonetheless.

## 3 Future Plans

### 3.1 Goals

One of the goals that we hope to soon accomplish is increasing attendance at our dinners. We understand that it is often hard for our membership to make it to every dinner due to late classes, work schedules, office hours, and UROPs. However, we believe that it is *very* important for our members to break bread together in order to get to know each other better and foster a sense of comraderie and community. Thus, we hope to work to motivate people to come to more of our dinners. One idea is to have a raffle and offer prizes to house members who attend the most dinners. Another idea is to have a discount on the house tax for members who attend every dinner during the semester.

In an effort to increase our scope of influence on campus, we are trying to expand our event programming in order to promote Hispanic culture to all students at MIT. One way in which we hope to accomplish this is by increasing the responsibility of the Cultural Chair. One of the most important positions in the Spanish House board is that of the Cultural Chair. This officer is in charge of organizing different events and activities to promote our culture and help others understand it. We now hope to mandate that the Cultural Chair host one event every month in order to show consistency in our commitment to studying and teaching others about our cultures.

Another goal of ours is to engage our incoming freshmen early on so that they do not lose interest in the house. In the past, it has been a Spanish House tradition to take the incoming freshmen out at the beginning of the Fall semester. For example, during Fall 2005, the freshmen were taken out bowling together with a few of the upperclassmen. Such an event provides an opportunity for the freshmen to get to know each other (and other Spanish House members) in a more intimate setting than that provided at any other REX event. However, this tradition has been overlooked during the past couple of years (2006 and 2007). We plan to restart upholding this activity as we believe it is of utmost importance to maintain the close bonds and unity of our members.

We have also come to realize that we have very loose ties, if any, with the Spanish Department and Hispanic faculty on campus while having a space to host them provides us with the perfect opportunity for networking. Thus, we are now trying to organize a mixer for Hispanic faculty to be hosted at Spanish House during the Spring 2008 semester. We hope that this occasion will provide Spanish House members with a chance to interact and engage Hispanic faculty members in a dinner setting and that students will be able to find out more about classes offered on campus with a focus on Latino culture and language.

We are also starting an archive of Spanish House documents in order to maintain better records of our past events. We are looking into purchasing a desktop for the house that would be used to store this information electronically. On the academic front, we are also looking to reorganize our course “bibles” that are now filling up the bookcases of our dining lounges. This will aid all of our members with their classes and also give us an idea about the types of materials that we need to gather in order

to complete our collection of course materials.

## **3.2 Events and Initiatives**

### **3.2.1 House trip to Montreal**

The house trip for the Spring 2008 semester will take place in April; we will be traveling to Montreal, Canada for a relaxing weekend of museum outings, city touring and a wonderful bonding experience. This activity is a great way to experience the world and take advantage of our location, which is so close in relation to Canada. It is also a fun experience to share between the members of the house - one that our membership will always vividly and fondly remember.

### **3.2.2 Cultural Newsletter**

This upcoming semester we hope to create a monthly cultural newsletter. This an attempt to promote and publicize the holidays and cultures of the various Latino countries. The publication will help to educate all of the members and visitors of the house about a variety of different cultures. It will be posted in visible areas in order to ensure that it is widely read.

### **3.2.3 Hispanic holidays**

In an attempt to educate our members on a variety of Latin American cultures, we will try to introduce the traditions of a variety of Hispanic holidays. On these days, we hope to prepare special dinners with the traditional dishes of the particular holidays and engage in any other customs of the celebrations. This will hopefully raise awareness among our membership about Latin American history and culture.

### **3.2.4 Mural**

In the Spring semester we hope to begin, and possibly complete, a mural that will serve as a visual expression of the unification of the various cultures that are represented by our members. This idea has been proposed numerous various times over the years but has never been carried out as planned. However, we are now applying for funding from the Office of the Arts in an effort to bring this project to fruition.

### **3.2.5 Mes Latino**

For Mes Latino (March 2008), Spanish House plans to co-host a movie night with either SHPE or ClubMEX. We have already scheduled Spanish Professor Douglas Morgenstern to come and speak at the event (and also lead a discussion). Refreshments will be provided for attendees and the event will be advertised and open to the entire MIT community.

## **4 Help and Support**

### **4.1 Problems**

One of our main concerns is the level of motivation of our membership. Oftentimes, students are too busy with schoolwork and give low priority to the sort of activities and events that Spanish House sponsors throughout the year.

Another problem that we have been facing is members' failure to pay fines owed to the house. The reason for this is the lack of legal authority to impose payment onto the house members. This poses several problems for the financial situation of the house, such as limited funds for events. As of today, we have an honor system, but clearly this system does not work. The house is in need of some sort of legal contract in which the members are legally forced to pay back the house or be barred from registration or graduation.

### **4.2 Possible Solutions**

It is imperative to ensure that the house continues to grow and flourish. We must find ways to show the house members that La Casa is important to them. Each member of the house decides this is where they would like to live whether it be a matter of companionship, culture, or a variety of other reasons. It is our job as a house to continually remind the membership of these reasons and make sure they never regret their decision. The members should desire to contribute to events and be an active without threats of fines or anything of this nature. We believe that the recently planned events for the Spring 2008 semester and energy brought by the new executive board will contribute to a more engaged and active house. The more included the members feel, the more willing they will be to support and participate in programs.

As MIT students, it is easy to say that we have too much school work to complete and that we do not have the time to participate in events that do not contribute to our academics. We feel that these same students do not use their time effectively and tend to push off work until the last possible moment. We also feel that members of the house have a difficult time juggling too many commitments simultaneously. We believe that it would be a good thing to bring in someone to speak about effective ways to manage time. If the members of the house are able to better manage their time, they will learn that the house activities are meant to be a break from their schedule rather than a burden.

During our event programming sessions, it is sometimes hard to find activities that are both educational and fun. Thus, we are now turning to new resources for ideas. One person that we consult often is our GRT, Francisca Rojas, who is always trying to network with other living groups and student organizations. We also have asked Michele Oshima (the Director of the Office of the Arts) for ideas, especially about bringing in national figures to campus. In the future, we hope to collaborate more with other Cultural Houses in an effort to diversify our programming.

Sometimes it is hard to find the right resources for a specific type of event or activity. We hope to solve this problem by exploring new funding opportunities

that would open up the doors for us to purchase more equipment. Additionally, we hope that through our networking with faculty, we will be able to engage them in our events and bring a broader spectrum of events to our membership.