

# TOWN NEWS

SECTION

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*'We're invisible. No one knows who our people are.'* — Melanio Gonzalez



Stephen Dunn / The Hartford Courant

■ Melanio Gonzalez, a member of the Taino Indians, displays some of the Taino crafts he has fashioned in his Meriden home.



# Celebrating a cultural rebirth

## Near-death trauma awakens passions

### in Taino Indian

By MARISA OSORIO COLON  
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MERDEN — Melanio Gonzalez isn't supposed to be alive.

Nearly 20 years ago, Gonzalez was putting hot tar on the new roof of the Middletown Police Department. He had just started spreading the tar when he lost his footing, the machine tumbled over, and 475-degree tar splashed over him.

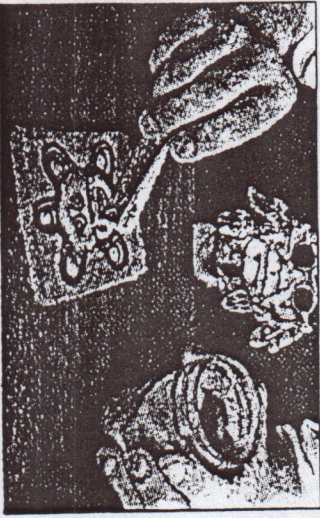
He received third-degree burns over more than half his body. His arms and chest are scarred with the skin grafts that were taken from his legs.

The incident changed his life — for the better, he says.

"I can't tell you how glad I was burned," Gonzalez said. "Without that nothing would have happened."

What evolved was the small business at which the 45-year-old city native has been working full time for almost three years.

"The Taino Way — Culture and History Through Art" is a small crafting shop in his Goodwill Avenue home. There, he re-creates the art of the Taino Indians, who once boasted a thriving civilization, numbering in the millions, in the Caribbean, South America and Florida.



■ Melanio Gonzalez uses a steady hand to create a sand painting on slate.

The center of Taino culture was in Puerto Rico, Gonzalez said, the homeland of his parents. He said he remembers the stories he would hear from his *abuelita* (grandmother) about Tainos, stories he didn't always take seriously.

His *abuelita* would tell Gonzalez about the Tainos, the language, the history, traditions and their family roots. *Abuelita* made crafts, too, and Gonzalez dabbled in it as a child.

After the accident, Gonzalez said he temporarily lost control of his hand and arm movements. A friend gave him a sand painting kit, hoping it would be therapeutic.

"It was a cheesy little kit," Gonzalez said with a laugh. "But I found that the more I did it, the more control I had with my hands."

Ten years later he found himself producing Native American sand paintings from all over the United States. He credits his wife, Alacogue, for pushing him to pursue his craft. Gonzalez continued as an industrial roof-

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er, but work became more difficult to find. So he began devoting more time to the colorful sand paintings that cover the walls of his home.

However, he wasn't comfortable doing Lakota, Hopi or Sioux Indian art anymore. Gonzalez had a calling to do the art of his ancestors.

"There's a hunger out there for our culture," he said. "We're invisible. No one knows who our people are. It serves my need to do what my grandmother told me to do. It's less lucrative because people always want pictures of thunderbirds and bears. But it's not my people. It's about the recognition that our ancestors deserve."

Gonzalez, whose Taino name is Xeti Aon Coaybay, wears his hair cut short on the sides with a long black ponytail hanging in the back. His olive skin seems to give away his Taino roots, but Gonzalez said being Taino is not about color.

"You have from black to blond in the nation," he said. "It doesn't matter. Color is just superficial. It's what's inside."

His sand art paintings sell for as little as \$5, and as much as \$200 for more intricate pieces. He makes the paintings by first drawing the designs on slate, then adding layers of glue and sand. The designs range from depictions of the Taino earth mother, *Atabex* (pronounced *Ata-besh*), to skulls and frogs.

He also makes traditional Taino instruments such as *maracas*, two round gourds with

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beans inside and a handle attached, and *güiros*, a hollowed-out gourd with ridges.

Last year, Gonzalez estimated he made about \$8,000 by selling his crafts and other items. He also visits schools in traditional Taino garb, attends powwows and sells his wares at Native American and Puerto Rican cultural events.

"What he's doing is so unique," said Al Meloni, executive director at the Institute for American Indian Studies in Washington, Conn. "There's very little available right now on Taino art and its meaning. In the sense of presenting it and preserving it, it's invaluable what he's doing."

Meloni said Tainos were the first native people with whom Christopher Columbus came into contact, yet it's the culture that's the least studied: Gonzalez is not only studying it, he's reproducing the art work, Meloni said.

"He's the only one in the area and one of the few in the country who's doing that," Meloni said. "Right now in this country we can pretty much call anyone [to discuss] North American cultures. But when you start dealing with Tainos, it's very difficult to find [an expert]. Hardly anyone knows anything about the Tainos. That's the role he has played and continues to play."

Lynne Williamson, director of the Connecticut Cultural Heritage Arts Program at the Institute for Community Research in Hartford, said Gonzalez is involved in a forum planned in May to explore Taino and other native cultures.

Williamson said there is a need for people to explore their past. "In the case of Puerto Ricans living in the diaspora, there's a sense of wanting to reconnect to a really beloved homeland," she said.

When she visited San Juan, Puerto Rico, Williamson noticed large contemporary murals on walls with an abundance of Taino symbols.

"It's very important to people's lives now," she said. "People want to know who they are and for Puerto Ricans it means having Taino blood as well as African and Spanish."