TIJUANA, Baja, Mexico -- Many who live in San Diego often forget that about 25 minutes south lies an international border that is a gateway to Mexico, a nation filled with culture, history, struggles and traditions vastly different but sometimes parallel to the United States.

Directly across the triple fence which makes the U.S.-Mexico border is Tijuana, the fifth-largest city in Mexico, and one of the most heavily traveled through cities in the West, due to its proximity to the busiest land-border crossing in the world.

Situated in Tijuana is a growing and vibrant LGBT community struggling for acceptance and equality in their hometown, and activists there are inviting the community from both sides of the border to join in this weekend's 16th annual Tijuana LGBT Pride March.

The event, which will be held Saturday, June 18, at 5 pm, will travel along the main streets of downtown Tijuana before ending at Plaza Santa Cecilia, between First Street and Avenida Revolucion and Second Street and Constitución. Participants will gather for what is being billed as the city's "premier equal rights demonstration" outside the Alliance Against AIDS Clinic, 7648 Calle 1ra (First Street).

A long struggle

The struggle for LGBT equality in Tijuana has come along way since the first pride march took place in the city in 1995.

According to Jesse Anguiano, a PhD candidate in Chicano/Latino studies at Michigan State University, two popular gay bars in Tijuana, El Ranchero and Los Equipales, were raided by police on Nov. 30, 1991. Several Tijuana residents and visitors from San Diego were detained.

Just two years prior, the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), a very conservative political party in Mexico, had come to power in Tijuana's municipal government.

In 1995, Tijuana activist Alejandro Garcia and a few others organized the first Pride March in the city. Anguiano, who is researching how media from both sides of the border documented the raids, believes that these events catapulted Tijuana's LGBT community into action, emerging and consolidating into a unified force to fight for equality.

Tijuana's Pride March celebrated its 15th anniversary in 2010, and organizers estimate that nearly 6,000 people participated in the march and lined the streets to watch it pass by, which is a far cry from the handful of people who took to the streets in 1995.

As attitudes toward LGBT people shift in Mexico, this year's march is expected to continue in the growth trend that has been experienced over the last 15 years.

Since 2006, Lorenzo Herrera has coordinated the small committee that organizes the march. He is said to be the LGBT community "go-to guy" in Tijuana, being a native of the city, and involved in the movement since 1995.

Herrera spends most of his free time volunteering for the "Fondo de Assistencia Para el SIDA, A.C." This organization, which provides HIV/AIDS and STD prevention services as well as food and support to individuals living with HIV/AIDS, was founded in 2004.

Ron deHarte to serve as International Grand Marshall

Herrera's committee has selected San Diego human-rights activist Ron deHarte to serve as the International Grand Marshall of this year's march.
deHarte, who served as executive director of San Diego LGBT Pride from 2006-10, currently serves as the executive vice president of Palm Springs Pride, and has served on the board of directors for InterPride, the international organization for pride organizers.

“Ron deHarte has been a friend of our organization and someone who has stood up to rally support for our work in Tijuana, Ensenada and Mexico City,” Herrera said. “From 2006-09 he organized the largest single-day event and human rights actions in the City of San Diego and in June 2009, he was attacked at an equal rights demonstration in Lemon Grove, Calif., while holding a rainbow flag and participating in the Equality Torch Relay.

“We have relied on his guidance and inspiration for many years. His support is invaluable and we are proud to honor his activism as the International Grand Marshal.”

deHarte said he is honored to have been selected as the International Grand Marshall.

“I’m looking forward to marching along Avenida Revolución and continuing the call for equal rights for all individuals,” deHarte said. “I’ve worked in Mexico and Central America and have seen the difficulties LGBT individuals face.

deHarte, who has worked for, volunteered and supported a number of large and small pride organizations throughout the world, recognizes the importance of local pride celebrations in the LGBT community’s greater struggle for equality.

“The pride movement throughout the world can only be as strong as the local equal rights activists and allies and each year we are seeing a stronger and stronger show of support for the LGBT community in Tijuana,” deHarte said. “In large part this support and increased awareness is a result of the dedication of activist Lorenzo Herrera, who, along with the committee members do great work for the LGBT community in Tijuana.”

If you go

While many media have reported increased incidences of violence in the border region, organizers say that as long as people follow the rules and use common sense, they will be safe. Those who wish to get more information about travelling to Mexico and read any travel warnings should visit the U.S. Department of State’s travel information website. Do keep in mind that a U.S. passport is required to return to the United States.

Because of the event’s close proximity to the border, organizers encourage those coming to the event from the United States to park on the U.S. side of the border (or take the San Diego Trolley to San Ysidro) and walk across the border.

Once through the border crossing, exit through the southern pedestrian turnstiles and ignore bus and taxi drivers as it is only a short walk. Turn right and cross Avenida Amistad, through the Viva Tijuana open-air mall, and then cross the large Tijuana River pedestrian bridge.

Continue walking directly west about three blocks and cross under the famous St. Louis-style arch on Avenida Revolución. Enter Calle 1ra/Artículo 123, walk along the right side of the mall, and proceed to number 7648.

While limited information about Tijuana Pride is available online, those interested in the LGBT community in Tijuana can check out Cocut LGBTI, Jornada Cultural Contra La Homofobia Tijuana 2011, and Tijuana Zona Gay on Facebook.