

Oh, Susana! Assistant dean of UT School of Law carries on sunny Commencement tradition

By Sarah Hubert

If you were to tell someone, "Hey, your genus *Helianthus* looks great!" most folks would probably just stare back at you. Not so Dr. Susana Alemán, assistant dean for student affairs in the UT School of Law. It's her job to pin them on more than 400 law students every time a class graduates.

Genus *Helianthus* is the botanical name for sunflowers.

The Sunflower Ceremony began in the fall of 1900, when the senior class law school members staged a civilized rebellion. Seems they felt snubbed for not being invited to a commencement ceremonies meeting. Consequently, they refused to wear caps and gowns for graduation. Told that they must wear a significant insignia to represent the Law School at commencement in order to graduate, the students opted to don Prince Albert coats with silk hats and pin sunflowers on their lapels. The soon-to-be lawyers, were able to justify the argument that "since sunflowers are grown worldwide — just like the legal profession, and since sunflowers turn their faces to the sun — just like lawyers turn their faces towards the light of justice,"

they should be allowed to wear sunflowers.

"I am convinced that the reason they picked sunflowers as the symbol, was because it was expedient," says Alemán. "They walked out the front door, saw all those sunflowers, and chose that."

Thus was born the UT School of Law Sunflower Ceremony and, consequently, a biannual task for the assistant dean. It has been Alemán's job to find the sunflower fields, pick 450-600 of them and keep them fresh until she can pin them on the graduates with safety pins with curtain rings attached. Also in keeping with the 1900 tradition, senior men wear light suits and senior women wear light dresses.

"I've been doing this for eleven years — this is my 22nd ceremony," reports Alemán whose background is in counseling and education. I guess by now I am a pretty darn good flower picker!"

Finding the flowers is usually the most difficult part because, as you might expect from nature, they don't always bloom on



Photo by Marsha Miller

Dr. Susana Alemán

cue. While she locates a nearby field one year, it might not be blooming there at the same time for graduation the next year. Such was the case this year, when her stand-by field was a late bloomer and she ended up contacting friends of friends to locate another one "35 miles out near Bastrop, a little ways down a narrow road and into a farmer's field."

Alemán (who graduated Magna Cum Laude with a BS in Secondary Education

from UT Austin in 1975) is very scientific and precise about the way she cuts the flowers. And it's not easy.

"I admit I am obsessed with sunflowers now. My office is full of sunflower stuff that students bring me. I've read a book about them. I look for fields everywhere. I drive everyone who rides with me crazy because I have to stop if I see even a yellow flower."

The students take this ceremony very seriously. While there apparently have been some previous assistant deans who had to resort to silk sunflowers, when Alemán suggested they she would do that if there was a hard freeze, the students strongly objected. "I got written protests. They said 'artificial flowers equals artificial legal education.'"

The Sunflower Ceremony is attended only by senior law students and their relatives and nearest friends. They wear silk flowers to the formal evening Commencement ceremony on the Main Mall to keep the real ones fresh for their Sunflower Ceremony the next day.

"I guess I bleed orange and white," Alemán says. "I love UT traditions. I really enjoy seeing the smiles on our graduates wearing their sunflowers when the ceremony is over. It is a great feeling of satisfaction."

On Campus, 6 June 1995, p. 8