

First Night fest will ring in the new year

By WALLACE BAINE
Sentinel staff writer

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SANTA CRUZ — You've got to like Trink Bickal's timing.

More than a year ago, Bickal and her husband, Bob, began gathering support for a community-centered, alcohol-free New Year's Eve celebration in downtown Santa Cruz called First Night.



Trink Bickal

A couple of months later on New Year's Eve — while the Bickals were visiting Monterey to be part of that city's First Night celebration — rioters on Pacific Avenue tossed rocks, bottles and bricks, damaging several storefronts and injuring police.

It was the best thing that could have happened for the First Night

movement. "Two days later, we were getting calls," said Trink Bickal.

This year, the Bickals' plans will come to fruition as more than 250 musicians and artists invade downtown on Saturday, Dec. 31. The idea is a "Take Back the Night" approach to New Year's Eve.

For the price of a \$5 button, revelers can come downtown and visit any one of 20 different venues to see live music, dance, theater, storytelling and other entertainment in a safe, convivial atmosphere.

"We're focused on bringing neighbors together around the idea of community and the arts," said Bickal, the president of the non-profit group that includes close to 40 community organizers.

The festivities will begin in the afternoon with entertainment geared toward families at 12 different downtown sites.

Entertainers such as singer Linda Arnold, actor Dharaj Maxfield

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Police hope alcohol-free translates to trouble-free

By JOHN BESSA
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Police are looking at First Night on New Year's Eve as the antidote to violence that has plagued past celebrations downtown.

"Our whole department will be working that night," said Police Chief Steve Belcher.

Downtown merchants who rang in the last New Year sweeping, smashed windows and counting lost merchandise are hoping it will work. But some are still hedging their bets.

"I think it's a good idea, but I still think there's a possibility it could get out of hand, and they should be prepared for it," said

Todd Noland, owner of Pacific Wave downtown.

Noland lost about \$1,500 worth of merchandise and glass last year.

Belcher said he's encouraged by reports from police chiefs in cities like Honolulu and Boston that have adopted the First Night plan.

"Their whole issue is kind of the same as ours. They did have very rebellious, troublesome crowds," Belcher said.

The cities found cooperative revelers diluted the troublemakers, he said.

"They brought in a lot of people that were more in tune with the celebration and New Year's

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and bubble magician Tom Noddy will perform in venues such as the Kuumbwa Jazz Center, Palookaville and the Civic Auditorium.

In the evening, the venues will expand to 20 and include a wide variety of performance art from jazz to blues, from modern to folk dance, from Chekhov to African storytelling.

At 11:30 p.m., the performances will stop as everyone hustles to the Town Clock where the countdown toward midnight will occur. Last year there was mayhem. This year there will be a wedding as a local couple has agreed to tie the knot shortly after midnight.

First Night is a franchised trademark, adopted by scores of cities across the country.

It dates back to New Year's Eve 1976 in Boston, the city which now attracts a million people to its annual celebration. The by-laws, es-

tablished by First Night Boston and embraced by the national Alliance of First Night Cities, mandate that First Night celebrations be alcohol-free, that they focus on the community's visual and performance arts and that all artists who participate be paid.

"No alcohol is key to keeping the celebration safe and friendly," said Paulette Lynch, executive director of First Night Monterey that debuted last year.

"First Night creates a culture. There are so many people out in the streets who have not been, drinking that the few who do drink are isolated."

The Bickals, former residents of the Boston area, took part in the First Night Boston celebrations before moving back to Santa Cruz in 1992. "It was a wonderful experience," said Trink Bickal. "I remember being in dangerous parts of the city feeling completely safe."

"It will transform downtown," said Susan Keniston, a folk singer scheduled to appear at First Night Santa Cruz who has participated in several First Night celebrations in her hometown of Burlington, Vt.

"There's this bustling mass of people all out meeting in the streets, friends and strangers. It's the way a holiday ought to be."

First Night Santa Cruz's budget is \$72,250, \$25,000 of which goes for payment to artists. The organizers raised much of the money through business sponsorships and grants, but hope that they can sell 5,000 buttons to break even.

First Night Monterey, with a similar budget, sold 5,700 buttons last year and hopes to sell 9,000 this year. Buttons are sold in many downtown business for \$5. On Dec. 21, the price of a button will increase to \$8.

For more information, call 425-7277.