

HARVEST PICNIC



Grey Bears and their supporters dine under the branches of a Harvey West Park oak Tuesday during their Harvest Picnic celebrating 40 years of community service. DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Grey Bears marks 40 years

Act of kindness grows into program to help feed seniors through the years

By TERRI MORGAN

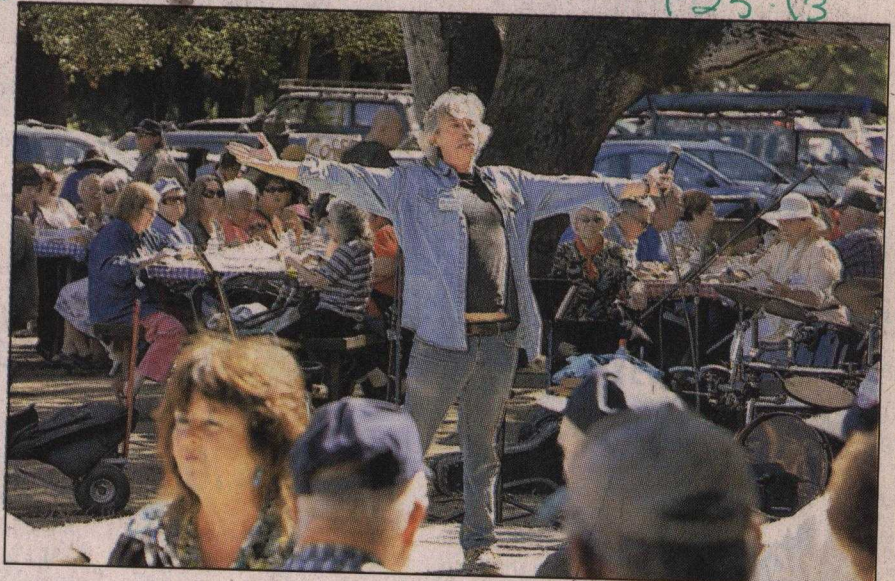
newsroom@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — It all started with a simple act of kindness in 1973. Kristina Mailliard and her boyfriend Gary Denny began sharing fruits and vegetables from their garden with local seniors.

Surprised to discover that many poor seniors they met were undernourished, they held a "harvest festival" to provide fresh produce for more people. That was the inception of Grey Bears, which celebrated its 40th anniversary Tuesday at the annual Harvest Picnic.

An estimated 1,500 people flocked to Harvey West Park to eat lunch, socialize, listen to live music, dance and enjoy the day. Speakers talked about the organization, its history and its focus.

A number of dignitaries — elected officials who represent the Central Coast — addressed the event. A man named "Love Twentytwo"



Santa Cruz comedian Richard Stockton provides entertainment at the Grey Bears Harvest Picnic on Tuesday in Harvey West Park. DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

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wandered through the picnic area handing out \$22 bills and information about why he is running for President of the U.S.

At least 200 volunteers cooked food, delivered meals on paper plates to diners seated at picnic tables, dispensed beverages, sold raffle tickets and cleaned up the grounds after the event. Tuesday's menu included barbecued chicken, baked beans, salad, rolls, and a variety of desserts, and beverages. The meals were free to anyone older than age 55, whether they were members of Grey Bears or not.

While volunteers were hustling to serve the guests, most were eager to talk about why they give their time to the organization.

"It's about people helping people to help people," said Elmo, a fifth-generation Santa Cruz resident who goes by one name. "We all come from the community to support the community through the gift of food."

Velvet Williams and Maria Loiacono, who were making huge bowls of salad, agreed.

"It's a wonderful organization," Loiacono said. "I think they're great. You couldn't find a better place to volunteer."

Volunteers are the heart and soul of Grey Bears, which has only a handful of paid staff members.

Judging by the smiles on many of the faces, most diners were happy to be at the



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Grey Bears step to the music of Danceland at the Grey Bears Harvest Picnic on Tuesday in Harvey West Park.

picnic.

"This is a grand event," said Doris Marcon, while she waited for her lunch to be served. "I'm having fun."

Dan Meeker, who recently moved to the county from Oregon, agreed, noting the picnic is a good place to meet people.

"I've met four or five people, plus a girl who I wouldn't mind having a longer relationship with," he said. "I'm having a great time."

In addition to hosting the community picnic, Grey Bears distributes groceries to its members through its weekly brown bag program, Elmo said. The bags, which are delivered to central pick-up spots and to the doors of housebound seniors, include plenty of fresh produce and a loaf of bread. The food was donated by local growers, shippers, packers and grocery stores. Volunteers picked up the items, and occasionally glean fresh fruits and vegetables from the fields, to distribute.

Grey Bears has grown

since its inception. In its first year, 100 seniors joined the organization. Two years later, membership had increased tenfold. Grey Bears was incorporated as a nonprofit in 1976, and has continued to increase its membership and add new programs for its members.

In 2012, the nonprofit totaled 4,100 members and countless volunteers. Providing nourishment remains a priority with the group, which distributed 78 million pounds of fresh produce and groceries to thousands of seniors since 1973.

The organization is also dedicated to recycling, reusing and repairing waste. Through its recycling center, thrift stores and composing program it diverts 18,000 tons of waste from the landfills annually. The organization also operates a computer electronics store, and community events.

Follow Sentinel correspondent Terri Morgan at www.twitter.com/soquelterri