

FAMILY EVENT

Watsonville celebration marks 25th anniversary

Mexican Independence Day event, el 16 de Septiembre, attracts thousands

Events

By Jessica A. York

jyork@santacruzsentinel.com

@ReporterJess on Twitter

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WATSONVILLE » Mexico's 19th century hard-fought independence from colonial Spain does not stir up the same fervor in the U.S. as a much smaller battle against a French army half a century later, called Cinco de Mayo.

Watsonville's 25th annual Mexican Independence Day celebration, el 16 de Septiembre, on Sunday, however, drew its share with

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thousands gathering for food, dancing and music.

Watsonville resident Marcos Ramirez sat on the side of closed-down Main Street, clapping and listening to a mariachi band with his sons Dante, 11, Eros, 7, and Marcos Rene, 4, and wife Favys Ramirez. He said the event is important to celebrate togetherness, and to enjoy life and freedom.

"I think it's important to remember what people have done for us, with all the freedoms that we enjoy now. And perhaps we appreciate the hard work it took to get to this point," Ramirez said. "I think we are very fortunate to live in a country that is allowed to celebrate all this diversity from other cultures in the world. That is something that we cannot take for granted."

In a large space in front of the event's stage, Benito Patino, of Watsonville, was the first to take to the dance floor, with only the Mariachi Eleazar Cortez band for company. He said during a break that if the band was going to put the work in to make music, he would dance.

Not long after, event newcomers Los Bailarines del la Calle, a group of Watsonville Senior Center members, performed a traditional flag introductory march, mixed with dancing. The revolutionary-inspired group wore plastic ammunition ropes



KEVIN JOHNSON — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Marchers make their way across Main Street in a flurry of color in Watsonville on Sunday as they celebrate El 16 de Septiembre.

crisscrossing their chests, and twirled model wooden rifle, with two flag bearers proudly displaying a Mexican and American flag each.

"They never have the flag introduced, with the Mexican and American flags. In Mexico, everywhere else, they have it introduced before they have the fiesta," said group founder Marylu Covarrubias. "It's a very important part of the celebration. We did this for the Fourth of July, but I wanted to do it for the Mexican fiesta, and it turned out really good."

Fiestas Patrias de Watsonville member and event founder Oscar Rios said he began planning the first 16

de Septiembre event in Watsonville 25 years ago, while campaigning for a Watsonville City Council seat. Now, he said he sees the event as twofold: passing on cultural history to a new generation and assisting in the downtown's revival.

"Since I won, we, all the committee, have been putting it on," said Rios of the volunteer-run group. "It's grown. People come over because it's more like a people's event. It's a community party."

Each year, organizers dedicate the celebration to larger national issues affecting Latin American immigrants, Rios said. Several Latin American countries,

+ **Online:** To see a short video on Watsonville's Mexican Independence Day celebration, visit santacruzsentinel.com and click on this story.

in addition to Mexico, celebrate their independence during September. This year, Rios, whose ancestors are from El Salvador, said the event is dedicated to the child immigrants who are crossing the border into the U.S.

"We're celebrating independence, but there's still a lot of poverty, still a lot of injustice going on. So, on one side, yes, independence. But we continue to go forward," Rios said.