

Mello is indispensable man of fair

By ANN CONY

"Hey Gil, do we have a piano yet for Tuesday night?"

"Hey Gil, I've got this humungous problem..."

"Guess what, Gil. We've already got 30 entries in the Diaper Derby!"

It's mid-afternoon at the fairgrounds, six days before the 1980 Santa Cruz County Fair opens, and the guy in constant demand around here is Gil Mello: stage manager, supreme arbiter, soother of ruffled feathers, holder of the purse strings, the place where the buck stops.

His title is fairgrounds manager — a year-round job that doubles in pace during the weeks before the fair.

Setting up the fair is a series of crises and Mello is called on to solve many if not most of them.

"Naturally, the closer you get to the fair, the more hectic it gets around here... It's funny how the greatest ideas seem to crop up the day before the fair," he deadpans.

He is seated, momentarily, at his cluttered desk. The wall behind him is lined with dozens of fairground keys, a watercolor done by his wife, Sandra, and a black-and-white photo of an encounter between a clown and a young child.

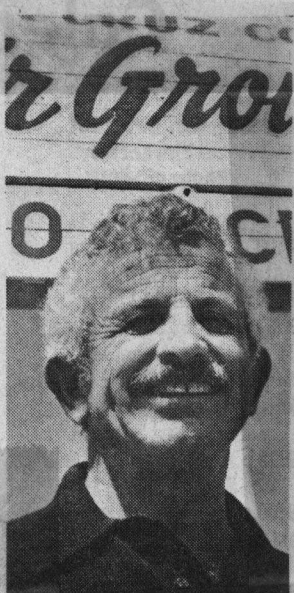
"We moved last weekend, and the phone company said they wouldn't be able to get our phone in for a week. My family was a little upset, but I said, 'Make it two weeks!,' " Mello jokes.

Tuesday was the start of the third County Fair under Mello's management.

"It's been a challenge," he admits. "I've enjoyed it, though. You know, this job doesn't require somebody with terrific imagination, but a person who can find others who have terrific imagination."

The job also requires a diplomatic, easy but outgoing disposition and a good sense of humor. Mello seems to have it all, with modesty to boot.

"I've never given up my agricultural roots, but what has been really meaningful in my life has been my involvement in the community... You realize that people around here are anxious to contribute and do something for others."



GIL MELLO

Mello goes along with the annual push for new events, better entertainment, higher attendance, etc., but he holds fast to the belief that "The basis of the county Fair is education — the agriculture, livestock, home crafts, the arts and so on." The carnival, live entertainment, commercial exhibits and concessions are the means for drawing the people to educational ends.

When Mello thinks and talks about drawing county residents to the fairgrounds, it's in terms of the total picture: the Mexican-American community as well as the Anglo community.

Sunday will be La Fiesta Mexicana, when local promoter Tony Rosa will bring three music acts from Mexico City to the fairgrounds stage for an afternoon performance on the heels of the Mexican Independence Parade through downtown Watsonville.

Sunday's entertainment is "aimed primarily at drawing first-generation immigrants," Mello says. "We hope we can encourage them to see the educational exhibits and gain something from it. The other members of the Mexican-American community will come as easily on the other days."

Mello has strived to make the fairgrounds accessible to the Hispanic community throughout the year for social events and firmly believes "This fairgrounds is for everybody."

He knows that some disagree with his views and policies, but, "We have a community here that needs to get along or we'll be in big trouble." Besides, the fair directors (appointed by the governor) are behind him all the way, Mello says.

"I feel I have a responsibility to make the fairgrounds a recreation center," he explains. That's why the fairgrounds hosts car and motorcycle races, horse shows, concerts, picnics and other events. "We need to develop those kinds of revenue funds to support the fair itself," Mello adds.

Mello, a "double cousin" of Assemblyman Henry Mello

(their mothers are sisters and their fathers are brothers), was born and raised in the Pajaro Valley.

Mello's maternal grandmother migrated here from the Azores in 1874. His father also migrated from the Azores, in 1906.

After graduating from Watsonville High in 1942, Mello served in the Navy during World War II, toured around and graduated from Annapolis in 1949.

He returned to the Pajaro Valley and joined his family in the apple-growing business until 1973, when he "decided to try something else."

For the next five years he worked as manager of the Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture here.

"I had to learn to wear shoes again, but it was a lot of fun," Mello says of those years.

"This (managing the fair) is a continuation of similar-type work — you deal with a lot of people."

Mello says he had "two promising job opportunities when I left the Chamber of Commerce. I could be a preacher and work 52 days a year, or be a fair manager and work six days a year. Naturally, I took the six-day job."

A former director of the Watsonville YMCA, Mello is still a familiar figure on the handball court, despite the heart attack he suffered 14 years ago. He also likes to play piano in his free time.

"Between the two I feel I'm able to retain what little bit of

sanity I have," he says.

His family helps on that score, too. Mello resides in Watsonville with his wife, the former Sandra Rugh, and her children: Brian, 12, Sally, a junior at Watsonville High, and Barbara, a sophomore at Westmont College in Santa Barbara.

Of his own children, David and Diana (whose last name is now Boyles) are grown and live in Watsonville; Debra is a dental hygienist in Pacifica.

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