

Watsonville celebrates Cinco de Mayo

By PAULINE ZENNER

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WATSONVILLE — A sense of pride filled the warm afternoon air Sunday at the Watsonville Plaza as the Mexican community celebrated Cinco de Mayo, a holiday that commemorates the Battle of Puebla, when a vastly outnumbered unit of the Mexican army repulsed an attack by invading French forces.

An estimated 7,000 people strolled through the park, feasting on home-cooked carne asada tacos, mangoes on a stick and other native dishes from the numerous food booths. Colorfully clad dancers performed to festive traditional Mexican tunes.

Watsonville Mayor Oscar Rios, who helped emcee the day's events, said that because of the violence connected to the verdict in the Los Angeles police-brutality trial, organizers were afraid the celebration wouldn't happen.

"We decided it would be the best way to channel constructive energy," Rios said. "The people wanted to celebrate because Cinco de Mayo is a time to pass their culture and traditions onto the new generation."

Rios said he felt the people were celebrating not only their country's eventual defeat of the occupying French forces, but also their continued struggle for justice, equality and democracy.

Celia Organista, with the Fiestas Patrias committee, which organized the event, said she was delighted at the turnout.

"It's a great day," she said. "I think we have even more people here this year than last year. We make no money from this, we're doing this for the community."

Organista said that most of the near-100 booths were run by non-profit organizations to help benefit the community.

It was a real family affair as children sat atop their parents' shoulders getting a bird's-eye view of the day's events while holding balloons and eating ice cream.

Mica Landa was helping out at the food booth run by White Hawk, a non-profit organization that teaches Mexican and American Indian culture to children of all backgrounds.

Landa said that the children from White Hawk have danced at the Cinco de Mayo celebration for about 10 years. About four years

ago, she said the organization, founded by her parents Guillermo and Ania-I Aranda, decided to open a food booth to help pay for the costumes and other programs for the children.

"It makes me feel proud to be here because we're helping to carry on our heritage," Landa said. "We're not letting it be forgotten."

Juan Garcia, a custodian with the Salinas School District, stood on the lawn, eating a tamale. He said he comes to Cinco de Mayo every year.

"I like the food and the music. It's a good way to spend the day and I get to see old friends I haven't seen in awhile," he said. "After what happened last week, this celebration is good for the kids, to show them that people can come together as families and enjoy themselves."

Bob Dwyer, director of the Watsonville chamber of commerce said the day went very well.

"This is a delightful representation of the diversity in Watsonville," Dwyer said. "It's part of the richness of this community."

Cinco-pating rhythms



Dancers from the group Esperanza del Valle perform for big festival crowd in Watsonville Plaza Sunday.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel