

CULTURE

500 or more attend Sunday Latino Fest

Annual event raises money for local scholarships



SERGE GIACHETTI THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Michelle Di Mischia, center, does a traditional dance from Oaxaca, Mexico, with members of the Guelaguetza Mexican folk dance group Thalia Schoenecker, left, and Iris Alejandro at the Latino Fest in Bellingham on Sunday afternoon.

Standing behind a steaming pot of posóle (a Mexican stew) on Sunday, Gerzon Marin served Latino Fest customers, switching between Spanish to English almost effortlessly.

Marin spoke no English when he moved to the United States from Jalisco, Mexico, seven years ago.

Marin, 26, learned as he went, earning his GED (the equivalent of a high school diploma) and later attending Skagit Valley College.

That's when he asked for help with college-level language skills from the Whatcom Hispanic Organization, which promotes literacy among the county's Hispanic population.

"After that I became involved in clubs and the student government," said Marin, who has won two of the organization's scholarships in the last two years.

All of the proceeds from this weekend's 10th annual Latino Fest — which attracted more than 500 people to Assumption Gym in Bellingham — go to the organization's scholarship fund, to benefit people like Marin.

The 11-man Mariachi Ayutla band greeted attendees at the event, playing favorites like "Cielito Lindo."

The festival offered authentic Mexican food, crafts and informational booths from groups like Whatcom Community College and Bellingham Technical College.

Lillian Gonzales sat at a table for the Northwest Regional Council at the event.

"We just wanted people to know that I speak Spanish and that we're in the community," she said.

Seattle's Guelaguetza dance group showcased Mexican folkloric dancing, stamping their feet and swinging broad, striped skirts into the air.

Anneliese Deleon, 16, of Ferndale won the event's Saturday talent contest, singing her song "Simplemente La Mejor" for audiences Sunday.

Organizer Pedro Perez said the turnout was tremendous, despite obstacles publicizing events for non-English speakers.

"There are no outlets. No (Spanish-language) radio or television," he said. "So it makes it very difficult to get the word out."

Perez said interest in the organization's scholarship has grown since the group raised them from \$500 to \$1,000.

Now a student at Western Washington University, Marin said his scholarship money will go toward his continued education in economics and political science.

"I am very grateful that an organization like this exists to help students who want to improve themselves and want to give back," he said.

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