

## Annual Latino Fest promotes culture, helps those in need

BELLINGHAM - When Emily Ziebell faced the audience at Latino Fest last weekend, it wasn't as a folkloric dancer or member of a mariachi band.

Ziebell, along with about 10 other people, competed in a dance-off to win a computer, which the Whatcom Hispanic Organization was giving away to the person who received the most applause after 30-seconds of freestyle dancing.

Having a computer in the house would mean that Ziebell's 8-year-old son could write with much more ease.



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"One of my sons has manual dexterity (impairments) so I was doing it for him because, Oh my God, it's a computer!" Ziebell said.

She ended up winning the competition along with two fellow dancers.

"This is going to help out a lot," she said.

The Whatcom Hispanic Organization, which organized the Latino Fest at Church of the Assumption on Saturday and Sunday, helps a lot of people like Ziebell. One of

the organization's most prevalent programs is its scholarship fund, which Latino Fest helps raise money for each year.

Since 1990, the nonprofit has awarded more than \$150,000 in scholarships to college students in Whatcom and Skagit counties.

Festival organizer Pedro Perez estimated that between 500 and 600 people turned out Sunday, which featured authentic Mexican food, crafts, traditional dancing and informational booths.

This year, the event was stretched over two days instead of one, with local organizations setting up booths on Saturday and the festival regulars, like a mariachi band and folkloric dance groups, performing on Sunday.

Perez, who is also president of the Whatcom Hispanic Organization, decided to add a day to the event to accommodate an influx of organizations that wanted to participate.

About 100 people attended the organization fair on Saturday, he said.

For future festivals, Perez is hoping to draw more community members to share their skills on Saturday.

This year for instance, a local student training to be a barber gave free haircuts.

"He's a friend of mine, so I told him, 'if you want to practice, I'll give you some gas money, show up on Saturday and do as many haircuts as you can,'" Perez said.