

Canal Welcome Center draws crowd for Christmas celebration

Nancy Isles Nation

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Children gather around Santa Claus (College of Marin Latino Student Union president Hector Gomez) before he hands out presents during the celebration. The party drew more than 500 people. (IJ photo/Alan Dep)

San Rafael's Canal community embraced the holiday season with a festive celebration at Pickleweed Community Center on Saturday.

The fourth "Christmas in the Canal" or "Navidad en el Canal" was celebrated by residents with music, carols, entertainment and 500 taco lunches.

The event was sponsored by the Canal Welcome Center, an organization that serves immigrants. The organization offers programs to help residents obtain services, learn English and develop the skills needed to earn a living.

"The Welcome Center brings the community social good and economic well-being," said Douglas Mundo, executive director.

The Christmas party brought together neighbors who share similar Latino heritage and traditions.

Music was provided by a band whose members included natives of Todos Santos, Guatemala.

Jaziel Melki, 20, who learned clown skills in his native Mexico, delighted children with his red nose and gigantic shoes, giving those who ventured forward a chance to introduce themselves and clown around with him.

Melki has been in the United States for two years and said he likes to play the clown because it brings out the child in everyone. "Everybody has a smile on their face," Melki said.

Hector Gomez, 20, president

of the Latin American Student Union at the College of Marin, helped organize a toy drive on the campus and collected about 100 toys that club members wrapped for distribution to the children at the party.

"Helping out with the toy drive is a tradition with us," Gomez said. "Our goal is to encourage kids in the community."

While the Welcome Center receives support from several donors, including the Marin and San Francisco community foundations, local church groups also are involved.

Ralph Hayward, from the Presbyterian Church of Novato, brought along free Spanish-language bibles for children, teens and adults, and found they were snapped up quickly.

"This is our way of doing what we are called on to do as Presbyterians," Hayward said. "Spread the word of God."



Luis Martinez of San Rafael holds his 2-year-old son, Luis, as they listen to musicians Saturday during the Canal Welcome Center's Christmas party at Pickleweed Community Center. (IJ photo/Alan Dep)
