

“West Side Alive!” Celebration Brings Neighbors Together

By Linda Wilson, *Making Connections - San Antonio* Diarist
with contributions by John Boudreau, *MC-SA* Program Assistant

San Antonio is well known for lively, creative celebrations, especially for Fiesta, a week-long celebration in April. Almost any time, San Antonians are ready to call attention to their heritage and passion for life. In keeping with that spirit, *Making Connections - San Antonio* sponsored “*West Side Alive!*” on September 16, 2004. What better way to celebrate San Antonio’s West Side than by holding a block party that covered 26 census tracks and drew an estimated 800 visitors!

Organizers chose the celebration date with care. *Dieciseis de Septiembre* not only commemorates the Mexican Revolution, but also the spirit of independence and achievement that Mexican-Americans all over the Southwest proudly claim. It was the appropriate time to call attention to all the work being done by West Side residents, nonprofits, entrepreneurs and educators.

The daylong event encouraged Westsiders to find out more about the positive things happening in their own neighborhoods. Ninety-one businesses, community based organizations, faith-based groups, churches, and schools opened their doors to visitors, inviting their immediate neighbors and any San Antonian to participate by attending open houses, tours, entertainment, health fairs, voter education booths and other events. San Antonio Archbishop Patrick F. Flores spent most of the day touring throughout the Making Connections area.



To showcase programs, products and services, *West Side Alive!* participants partnered in the following ways:

- Opened their doors to the community on September 16th at a time convenient to their business or agency.
- Provided incentives to prompt families to return to their business or agency. For example, some offered discount coupons to encourage visitors to come back.
- Provided samples to allow families to try products/food.
- Provided information on their business or agency’s history and background.
- Left their own businesses or agencies to network with other *West Side Alive!* participants.

Focal points of the West Side Alive! celebration

Participating sites ranged from an auto repair entrepreneur who provided “Car Talk” (helpful hints on auto repair) to large institutions such as Our Lady of the Lake University. Some events warrant special recognition for their unique involvements.

Guadalupe Plaza and neighboring J.T. Brackenridge Elementary School banded together to bring attention to services. On September 16, the school opened its doors for a “mobile” PTA meeting that spilled out of school boundaries into Guadalupe Plaza and the surrounding commercial area. Fatherhood Campaign volunteers led guided tours through the area and recruited area businesses and agencies to extend their hours. Families dropped into dental clinics for free toothbrushes, restaurants for free samples and neighborhood agencies for advice on health care and other services available close to home.



Farther west in the Edgewood School District area, Edgewood Family Network (EFN) had even more reason to celebrate! As part of an agreement with Edgewood Independent School District, EFN is now housed in a school closed by the District. A vacant area in the community is now alive with activities and services. EFN marked officially opened their new headquarters with a “*West Side Alive*” ribbon-cutting ceremony. By utilizing this vacant space in an elementary school, EFN leaders have centralized their activities and made new services

available. The new site offers parenting classes, after-school tutoring, Spanish-English conversation classes, bilingual computer literacy, training for EFN’s *promotora* program, small business classes, and legal advice on wills and immigration. Mariachis were on hand to celebrate the opening with a *dieciseis grito*, and puppet shows conveyed the story of their heritage to the children who attended.

In another part of Edgewood, student performers from the Edgewood Academy of Fine Arts, a magnet high school, bridged past and present. Costumed dancers performed Mexican folkloric dances for traditionalists, and the school’s resident rock band entertained on the patio.



At Our Lady of the Lake University (OLL), the focus was on literacy. The Center for Women offered information on family financial literacy, while the OLL Department of Education focused on literacy in general. Kids and families from neighborhood schools and OLL students joined together for an outdoor picnic and live music. Preschoolers from OLL's day care placed signature tempera handprints on a wall covered in butcher paper to mark their own "*Hands Across the West Side*" poster.

Visitors to Benitia Family Center in *Los Jardines* neighborhood could obtain advice on making wills, improving health care or just enjoy the entertainment provided by indigenous dancers and an accordion *conjunto* band. To encourage people to move through the neighborhood, Benitia organizers provided "passports." As they trekked to participating *West Side Alive!* sites, people acquired signatures or stamps to mark their journeys.



The Mexican American Unity Council (MAUC) coordinated with churches, businesses, agencies, and a charter school to create a one-stop place to celebrate and receive important community information. Elementary students from nearby La Escuela de las Americas Charter School marched through school grounds, wearing the bright green, red and white costumes of *dieciseis*.

For its size and comprehensiveness, *West Side Alive!* was a San Antonio first.

After this article was written, the popular event was repeated in 2005 and 2006. The photos accompanying this article are from those years.