

## Culture celebrated at Cinco de Mayo

Written by Darci Tomky

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This year's 10th annual Cinco de Mayo celebration is bigger and better than ever. Everything from a jalapeño eating contest to folkloric dance performances will be going on Saturday, May 8 at the Phillips County Event Center.

"We feel we'll have a very large crowd," said event organizer Jessie Ruiz. "There will be more things to get the public involved this year."

Ruiz teamed up with the NJC LEARN group (Latino Education Achievement Recruitment Network) and individuals from several towns in the area to make this collaborative event a day to remember. All of northeastern Colorado is invited to the celebration, and there will surely be something to spark everyone's interests.

The day kicks off with a free health fair for the Hispanic community offered by Melissa Memorial Hospital at Holyoke High School from 9 a.m.-12 noon.

Activities at the Event Center begin at 11 a.m. with a salsa contest. A fiesta bash meal will take place from 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m. with the first 200 people eating free.

Children's finger printing and photo identification kits will be offered from 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m.

At 12:15 p.m. the U.S. and Mexican flags will be presented followed by kids games including a bowl-a-thon, piñatas, plungers painting and toss contest.

Event-goers won't want to miss Rararuri, the special entertainment at 1 p.m. This is a group of 13 folkloric dancers from Colonia Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico who will be presenting a dance program with traditional Mexican costumes and dances.

Alma Nuñez, who has served as a Paquime dance instructor in Holyoke, is part of the group which is made up of dancers as young as elementary school all the way through college.

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The celebration continues with a talent show at 2 p.m. followed by a kids bubble gum blowing contest at 2:30 p.m. and a jalapeño eating championship shoot out at 3:30 p.m.

Saturday night, event-goers can gather at the Event Center for a fiesta social hour from 7-8 p.m. Rararuri dancers will perform again at 8 p.m. Perfil Norteño will provide music for the dance which lasts until midnight. There will be three dance contests to keep people dancing and entertained.

Organizers noted there will be security at the Cinco de Mayo event. No alcohol is allowed at the Event Center outside of the Cinco de Mayo beer garden.

All funds raised from the event will go toward scholarships. Ruiz said their goal this year is to give two \$500 scholarships to help students further their education. They have given over \$10,000 in scholarships in the last 10 years.

This year's event sponsors include Melissa Memorial Hospital, Cinco de Mayo board, Nebraska PrintWorks, Jack's Bean, Seaboard Foods, Farmers Insurance, NJC—LEARN, Lisa Murphy Agency, New York Life—Sonia Hubbard, Holyoke Marketplace, AFLAC and Budweiser.

## **Cinco de Mayo history celebrated**

Cinco de Mayo—the Fifth of May—is a holiday commemorating the unlikely victory of the Mexican militia over the French army at the Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862. Don't let it be confused with Mexico's Independence Day which is actually Sept. 16.

In an effort to secure dominance over the former Spanish colony and collect debt owed to them, France sent troops to Mexico in 1862. The Mexican militia, led by General Ignacio Zaragoza, defeated the far better equipped French expeditionary forces. Mexican troops were small in

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numbers but strong in heart.

“For the Mexicans, it was a bittersweet victory,” said Maria Rodriguez. The French troops lay dead around the city of Puebla for a long time, and many Mexicans died from lack of food and water. “There was too much lost,” noted Rodriguez.

Even though the French ultimately won the war and Archduke Maximilian ruled in Mexico for three years, the victory at the Battle of Puebla carries much significance in Mexican culture. Cinco de Mayo commemorates the attitude of those ragtag Mexican troops who knew they were tough, committed and strong. They believed in their cause and believed they could prevail.

This regional holiday is most popular in the southern Mexican town of Puebla. Other areas of the country also celebrate Cinco de Mayo with varied levels of enthusiasm.

The popularity of the holiday eventually caught on north of the border in the United States, especially in cities with a high population of people with a Mexican heritage.

Cinco de Mayo first became popular in the U.S. in the 1950s and 1960s, according to National Geographic, partly because of an outpouring of brotherly love. The U.S. government began a Good Neighbor policy in an effort to reach out to neighboring countries.

The holiday’s purpose was to form a bridge between the Mexican and American cultures, and activists embraced it as a way to build pride among Mexican-Americans.

It has now transformed into a celebration of Mexican culture, food, music, beverage and customs that both Mexican-Americans and Anglo-Americans can come together for.

“Cinco de Mayo is a chance for a cultural celebration,” said Rodriguez. “I feel like we are honored.”

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Holyoke's first Cinco de Mayo event, complete with piñatas and dance performers, was sponsored by Holyoke Arts Council in 1991.

Ten years ago a new Cinco de Mayo board was formed for the Chamber of Commerce's event in 2000—a strong foundation for the 10th annual event held this year.

Cecilia Marquez, director and instructor for Holyoke's Paquime dance group, has been involved with Cinco de Mayo the past 10 years. "It's a good opportunity for the exchange of ideas," she said, noting the holiday is a great time for Holyoke residents to get together to celebrate their cultural heritage.

"We are reaching out to build a bridge in the community," added Ruiz.

For the kids in Marquez's dance group, folkloric dancing is all about making connections, learning about language and exploring a different way of doing things. When they put on the colorful costumes from the various regions, they feel like Mexicans, said Marquez.

Cinco de Mayo is all about acceptance. From Marquez's perspective, the holiday reminds her where she comes from, where she is now and where her kids came from. "It's OK who you are. Celebrate who you are!"