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Local News

Fiesta provides star-studded support for the community

Estimated 1,500 people attend event in Racine

BY PETE WICKLUND
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RACINE — Those attending Fiesta 2007 this weekend at Festival Park might have found themselves caught up in the magic of the moment, but they also were helping to lay a strong foundation for the future.

That's because the event, now in its third year of being run locally by the Hispanic Business and Professionals Association, allows several local Hispanic groups to raise money for their scholarship efforts.

An estimated 1,500 people attended the event Friday, and many more were expected Saturday with the appearance by Grammy Award winner Michael Salgado on the festival's main stage. Fiesta 2007 runs from 11 a.m. until 11 p.m. today and features more appearances by Salgado at 7 and 10 p.m.

Dolores Hernandez, vice president of the HBPA, said it really was a coup for the group's small festival organizing committee to net such a big-name act as Salgado.

"I think tonight (Saturday) is going to be the night for Racine to remember," Hernandez said. "We're really setting our standards high. We're setting a precedence for the City of Racine in bringing this kind of entertainment here."

Hernandez said people from throughout the Midwest booked local hotel and motel rooms to attend the fiesta, no doubt to see the entertainment and catch up with relations. But she said the festival is also attractive to residents of nearby locales like Milwaukee, Kenosha and Waukegan, Ill., because of Racine's ambiance.

"They like our small community because everyone knows everyone," Hernandez said.

The festival, Hernandez said, is much more than big-name entertainment and the festival's annual jalapeno-eating contest. It also showcases local talent and sends a strong message about culture.

"I love the Indian dancers. That's my favorite part of being here," said Mariciela Belmares, 20, of Racine. "It makes you go back to your roots of being a Latin American. I love culture and that's a very big part of this."

Belmares is one of five local young women competing for this year's Miss Latina Racine Scholarship competition. And part of the requirements to compete is taking part in public relations efforts for the scholarship corporation at various community events and selling raffle tickets.

Miss Latina committee members also were selling water, soda and nachos at Fiesta 2007, and the proceeds are a major

source for the scholarships, said Diana Felix, vice president of the board. The winners of the scholarships will be announced at a September banquet. The top winner will receive \$2,000, the runner-up \$1,000 and the remainder of the contestants will each receive \$500.

At the other end of the festival grounds members of Por La Gente, a local service group that has a primary mission to support Hispanic youth athletics but also helps the community with other endeavors, was selling hot dogs, brats burgers and roasted corn — a big hit at the festival.

Eddie Guzman, past president of the 30-year-old organization, said the group has been providing scholarships to Hispanic students from Racine County since 1984. Last year it awarded \$2,000 scholarships to Stephen Sanchez, now a student at the Milwaukee School of Engineering, and to Yesdnia Arjon, a student at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

Hernandez said the HBPA will use gate proceeds and beer sales at the fiesta to help finance the four scholarships it awards each year.

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