

Royal party for Three Kings

By Brandon Bailey bbailey@mercurynews.com San Jose Mercury News

Posted: Sat Jan 07 22:34:41 MST 2012

MercuryNews.com

As a child in Argentina, Mariela Codina Cheung would celebrate El Día de los Tres Reyes Magos by putting out a handful of straw -- a snack for the camels of the three kings who visited the baby Jesus. She'd also leave out her shoes, hoping the kings would fill them with gifts.

Now that she's raising her own children in the United States, Codina Cheung said she's noticed that Three Kings Day, a traditional holiday that marks the 12th day of Christmas, is celebrated by many Christian cultures around the world but not so widely here.

That's why Codina Cheung decided to bring her husband and three children Saturday to the Three Kings celebration at the Children's Discovery Museum in downtown San Jose, where they donned paper crowns and posed for family photos with three colorfully costumed, volunteer "kings."

"With my kids growing up here, they would hardly know about the day except for what I tell them," she said. "This way they can meet the Three Wise Men and have an idea of what it means."

Hundreds of families joined the celebration, which continues at the museum Sunday, as part of a community outreach program that started 15 years ago. Executive Director Marilee Jennings said the idea of a Día de los Tres Reyes celebration started when museum staffers met with a community advisory board to explore ways of drawing more Latino families to the popular local institution.

"Many families, particularly from Mexico, had to leave the Three Kings celebration behind when they came here," Jennings said. "But we learned that many parents still wanted to share the tradition with their children here."

This year, the 12th day was actually Friday, but the museum planned its celebration for Saturday and Sunday so more families could attend. The event included crafts, snacks and performances by Folklórico dancers, mariachi musicians and other artists. Local residents Martin Sanchez, Julian Lugo and David Torres volunteered to wear the colorful robes of the three kings: Melchor, Gaspar and Baltasar.

Jennings said the museum makes a point of recruiting young performers from the area. Gabriela Sepulveda, a 12-year-old from San Jose with a powerful voice, sang a series of traditional songs on Saturday.

The museum also holds events at other times of year to celebrate traditional Chinese, Vietnamese and Indian holidays. "We want the Children's Discovery Museum to be a place where families from various communities in San Jose can celebrate their culture," Jennings said.

Many Christians around the world hold feasts or other celebrations to mark the 12th day after Christmas, when tradition says the Three Wise Men arrived with gifts to honor the newborn Jesus as the son of God. While observances vary in different places, children in Mexico and other Latin American countries write letters to the Wise Men before the big day and then look forward to finding toys or other gifts in their shoes.

Families also celebrate by sharing a meal and a cake known as Rosca de Reyes, with a toy baby Jesus baked inside.

"We don't usually celebrate the day, but my wife was born in Mexico and they had that tradition," said Oscar Macias, 32, who grew up in Watsonville.

He and his wife, Juanita, brought their two daughters to the museum on Saturday. Macias held his younger daughter and swayed to the performance of Mariachi Juvenil Alma de Mexico, a group of young musicians and singers based in Gilroy.

CELEBRATION CONTINUES ON SUNDAY

The celebration of El Día de los Tres Reyes Magos will continue Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. today, at the Children's Discovery Museum, 180 Woz Way, San Jose. Admission is free for museum members and infants, \$10 for nonmember children and adults, \$9 for nonmembers age 60 or older.