

Empire News

WILD RIDE Balloon goes off course, lands unexpectedly **B3**

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Prayers scrawled on paper stars tell the story



JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

Jessica Michaca, 13, of Santa Rosa rubs the head of her sister Jasmine, far right, as they leave the Sonoma County Fairgrounds on Thursday with gifts and full bellies after attending the Redwood Gospel Mission Christmas.

Thousands flock to SR fairgrounds for Gospel Mission's Christmas giveaway

By **JEREMY HAY**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

The stars were cut from stiff yellow paper and hung on an imitation Christmas tree.

People had written prayers on the stars, and one said this: "Need a home 4 my family of 7."

Here was another: "Don't have a brother as a gangster."

And this, in Spanish: "Being a friend is to give love."

The story of Thursday at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds — where through the day thousands of people from all the harder walks of life passed through, drawn by the prospect of some comfort and company, some food, some toys, to pray and be prayed for — was scrawled

on the stars.

"We're really poor, so we wished to have food," said Maria Espinoza of Santa Rosa.

She's 29, a secretary, a single mother of five children, and along with her mother, spent the day at the fairgrounds with thousands of others who came to the annual Christmas party organized by the Redwood Gospel Mission.

Her sons were smiling and energetic and had eaten well, better than the corn dogs and burritos that are their standard nightly fare, she said.

"We told them this was going to be like a Christmas dinner," she said.

Are they a happy family?

"We're happy, but we wish we had food every day," she said. She had an easy smile.

It was that sort of day.

"It's beautiful," said Lawrence Ray of Santa Rosa.

The day had been lush, the air warm and soft as melting butter, but it was turning chilly

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MISSION: ‘Everybody we see is poor, everyone is needy’

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as darkness came.

Outside Finley Hall, Ray, 39, wrapped his arms around his oldest son, Brandon, 11, who wore only a T-shirt.

Both had paintings on their cheeks — a candy cane, a handlebar mustache — and Ray smiled a smile worth envying.

Today, he said, “I learned sweetness of the heart. Everybody is smiling. There are some days people aren’t so open.”

Jordun, 9, ran up, his face painted too. Ray’s smile grew.

What circumstances brought you here, Lawrence Ray?

“Problems with drinking and I lost my family. I found God, and I’m getting it all back slowly,” he said.

Now in its 11th year, the event has grown as Santa Rosa has grown, said Jeff Gilman, ex-

ecutive director of the mission, located in Railroad Square.

He estimated about 4,400 people would attend. Six hundred volunteers were on hand.

“Everybody we see is poor, everyone is needy,” he said. “We don’t have a lot to offer them but we want to help brighten their holidays.”

Not everyone was pleased.

People were told that to receive free toys and bags of food they would have to attend a half-hour chapel service.

“It’s not fair,” said Denise Hernandez, 23.

She has a baby, she said. It wasn’t the religion that turned her away, it was the time — she didn’t have it to spare.

To these complaints, Gilman said he wouldn’t insist on the service.

“They don’t have to if they don’t want to,” he said. “We

want to offer it; it’s not a requirement.”

In the Garrett Building, services were held one after another, and during one a man named Sergio, from the Cristiana Ebenezer church off Petaluma Hill Road, testified to about 200 people about his life old and new.

“My name does not matter,” he said. “What matters is what God says, what God can do in our lives.

“I was dedicated to distributing drugs in the city of Santa Rosa,” he said. His marriage was a farce, he beat his children, “Satan dominated me.”

A man in the front row, with shoulder-length dirty blond hair, clapped and nodded.

Later, Tyler Stone, 35, left Finley Hall lugging three bags of groceries and a turkey.

He graduated from Montgom-

ery High School in 1987, Stone said, and not too long ago he, his mother and her boyfriend had to move out of their house on Sonoma Avenue after his grandmother died. Now he lives in a trailer near Bryden Lane and his mother lives in a trailer park near Cotati. He would take the food there.

“It kind of makes you humble,” he said.

Stone said he believed in God, but said nothing about writing a prayer on a star to hang on the imitation tree.

It could have been his, or easily someone else’s from among the crowd, the star that read: “Please pray for me and my family, my grandmother, we are having a bad time.”

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