

METRO

Seniors Day honors elders

1,600 celebrate at 4th annual event

By Vincent T. Davis
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In the cool shade of oak trees, San Antonio and Bexar County officials honored the contributions of older San Antonio residents at the 4th Annual Senior Day, drawing an estimated 1,600 elders from across the city to Camargo Park for a day of dancing, games and education.

Friday's event, which was sponsored by the City/County Joint Commission on Elderly Affairs and WellMed Charitable Foundation, was set up to honor seniors during Older Americans Month. Seniors who are registered in the city's senior nutrition program were eligible to participate in field day activities such as dancing and chair volleyball. The event also included a resource fair.

At Pavilion B, in front of the bean-toss games, Liz Garcia-Smith, 63, led rows of dancers to Latin rhythms and old-school melodies. "Show everybody how to do it!" she shouted, as the crowd followed her in variations of the cha-cha, the merengue and the robot.

Halfway through, a woman put aside her cane and joined the bodies in motion.

"When I see that, it makes me want to cry," said Garcia-Smith, a Zumba Gold instructor at the Northeast Senior Center. "My goal is to keep them moving and out of the nursing homes."

WellMed Charitable Foundation Executive Director Carol Zernial said it was important to remember the people who built our community and had given back all of their lives. "All of



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Jose Gomez sings with Mariachi Azul del Cielo from the Somerset Independent School District on Friday during Seniors Day at Camargo Park.

you who participate in the life of this community contribute and make all of us better," she said.

There were 16 seniors nominated for volunteering at senior centers, one from each of the council districts and the county precincts and for the mayor and county judge.

The nominees included Martha Gamez from the Normoyle Senior Center, who always arrives early and doesn't leave until the day's end; Thomas Botzenhardt, a 91-year-old World War II veteran who regularly leads the folks at the Willie Cortez Senior Center in

the Pledge of Allegiance; and Marion Thomas, who founded the Blessed Angels Community Center, an emergency food pantry for seniors, families in need and low-income veterans.

The city's two mayoral candidates, nearing a June 10 runoff, attended the event to congratulate the award winners and acknowledge all seniors for their lifelong contributions to San Antonio.

James Johnson, 69, a retiree from Long Island, New York, carried a plastic bag weighed down with booklets about health and welfare and a large cup he won for his skill at a golf

game. He said he was impressed with the day's events.

"It was pretty nice," Johnson said as he moved along a line for lunch.

Mariachi Azul del Cielo, from Somerset Junior High school, serenaded the seniors as they ate their meals under two tents. "They're going to be the biggest part of the day," Jac Hernandez, the group's musical director, said of his students, who also mingled with the seniors. The students "get to speak to them as if they were talking to their grandparents."

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