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Childhood friends reconnect, keep West Side memories alive

By ERIC ADLER
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Some 60 Christmases ago, they were just boys. *Mexicanos*, they called themselves, and *compadres* — friends bound by a life along Southwest Boulevard that was wilder than they often like to admit.

Back then, Jesse “Shorty” Enriquez seemed always in trouble with the cops. Jerry Morales was a Golden Gloves champion in the making.

Back then, Angelo Diaz’s tough-skinned father, a railroad man, ran a card game out of his kitchen that lasted three days.

Summit Street, lined with nicer homes, was called “Irish Hill.” Fathers who weren’t muscling beef in the stockyards toiled at the railroads. Mothers might as easily be raising 11 children as one.

Back then, if anyone had told Benny Fuentes or John Ortega or any of a score of the other guys from the old neighborhood that six decades later — after they had fought in war, married, had families, retired and became grandparents — not only would they be hanging out with each other again, but they’d also be delivering holiday help to people poorer than they once were, they would have said it was nuts.

But so it has happened for the “Westside Companeros,” a self-named group of childhood friends, almost all Mexican in heritage, all now in their mid- to late 70s. They once numbered 20, but six have died in recent years.

Separated for 50 or more years, they grew tired of seeing each other mostly at funerals and weddings. Fuentes, 77, a retired accountant who lives in Shawnee, floated the idea of a getting together on the first Monday of each month at a restaurant in the old neighborhood to share stories and laughs.

That was 10 years ago.

From that monthly gathering was born a quiet Christmas tradition, performed without fanfare or publicity, from a group of hardly wealthy men grateful for what life has brought them.

“Where do we come from? We come from the dirt, the dirt poor,” Diaz said. “Some people cry when we give to them. It’s a beautiful thing.”

The guys pitch in \$30 or \$35 each. They get a deal from a friend to buy as many as 80 turkeys, and a handful of the friends deliver them to organizations that help the poor.

“I remember there were Christmases we couldn’t afford a turkey,” said Enriquez, 77, who, after he left the neighborhood, would become a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne and work for some 30 years making railroad wheels.

“I did all right,” Enriquez said.

So did the rest. Most enlisted to serve in the Korean War: Navy, Air Force, Army. Some didn’t come back; most did. They married, mostly neighborhood girls. Three neighborhood guys all got married the same day. They had families. Good jobs.

Angelo Diaz of Prairie Village, married for 57 years and who turns 75 two days after Christmas, would end up traveling through Latin and South America working for the U.S. government. John Ortega, soon to turn 78, retired as a captain with the Kansas City Fire Department. Jerry Morales would, indeed, become a two-time Golden Gloves champion, a boxing coach and referee.

Jess Barbosa, 77, of Gladstone, became an executive chef.

Although he once joked, after he retired, that he would never step into a kitchen again, he broke his promise several Christmases ago when he and buddies learned that the mother of a dozen foster children had lost her home to fire.

“He cooked the whole meal and delivered it to them,” Diaz recalled.

The list of guys who gather each month goes on: Tino Lopez and Dan Rojas, Tom “Bebo” Padilla and Manuel Hernandez, Ismael Ortiz, Ray Velasquez, Bert Cretcher and Jerry Horseman — the latter the only two “gringos” in the bunch.

“We all went to school together,” said Horseman of Shawnee. The friends attended Manual High School or Redemptorist.

Horseman, 77, was raised with his sister on the West Side after his parents divorced. In the late 1990s, he retired as vice president of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers.

“That’s the way it was. When you went to school, you went with Germans, Italians, Mexicans, Jews, Greeks, Italians. And we got along!”

At least for the most part. Horseman recalled how he became bound to boys, “up from nothing” kids, all of whom roamed a neighborhood that, at times, could be as rough as it was protective.

“I used to go over to Penn Valley Park and catch crawdads and fish,” Horseman recalled. “I used to have to fight my way there and back.”

On Saturday, a week before Christmas, Diaz drove his white pickup to a Price Chopper in Kansas City, Kan., and with \$450 of the friends’ money, he loaded up 80 frozen turkeys.

First stop, at 8:30 a.m., was the Westside CAN (Community Action Network) Center, the day-labor site where men — mostly immigrants from Mexico and Central America, few of whom speak English — gather to pick up work.

Drop-off: four turkeys.

“He’s a good guy. Just a good neighborhood guy,” Officer Matt Tomasic, who operates out of the CAN Center for the Kansas City Police Department, said of Diaz. “He gives us four turkeys and we give it to people who probably wouldn’t have much to eat.”

“You should see these guys cook them up,” Diaz said.

Although he is retired — got bored and fat, he said — he went back to work five years ago as a mechanic at DarCo Equipment Services, fixing industrial sprayers.

The men at the CAN Center, he said, remind him of the hard-working adults he knew as a child, barely any of whom could speak or write English.

“I’ve been gone from this neighborhood for 50 years,” he said. “My heart is still here.”

There, on this morning, Diaz and three of his buddies gathered. Ortega, the retired fire captain, filled his trunk with turkeys to take to Redemptorist Church. Morales, the boxer, loaded up his Cadillac and headed for the East Side, to the Blue Valley corps of the Salvation Army.

Diaz hauled most of the turkeys himself: to the Kansas City Police Department, the Guadalupe Center, the Little Sisters of the Poor; City Union Mission and Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral. Up Irish Hill to deliver four to Posada Del Sol, an apartment complex for the elderly.

Meantime, Enriquez picked out a single turkey for special delivery. It was to go to one of the guys’ former boyhood friends, a man a lot of the fellows knew, but who isn’t one to come to the monthly Companeros dinners.

This holiday he was sick, having just had a heart attack. Although he has medical insurance, he has none for prescriptions.

So the men planned on surprising him with a basket. “You know, with canned goods, some apples and oranges,” Diaz said.

And, of course, a turkey — compliments from the guys from the old neighborhood who, on the first Monday in January, would be back for dinner to hoist drinks and tell stories.

“This is what we’re all about on this thing,” Enriquez said. “It’s Christmas.”

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