

Christmas in Arlington

Porfirio López

The autumn wind blows the brown and yellow colored leaves from the trees until their twirl comes to a halt as they reach the parking space of the Hernandez residence.

In a few weeks, the Hernandez' will host a musical procession and a fiesta at the same time.

The homeowner, Fidencio, in a jean jacket and a Los Angeles Dodgers cap, sweeps and sweeps his front yard with a broomstick because he has relatives coming over and doesn't want the home a mess.

"There's always some cleaning to do, but when all mi Familia comes together including the neighborhood, it is all worth it," he says.

Christmas time in Texas and around the nation is a time for families and friends to gather and spend time with each other.

But there is another type of holiday that is familiar to many families in Fort Worth.

Beginning December 16 and ending nine days afterward, on December 24, a Hispanic celebration brings this neighborhood together, even neighbors who are too afraid to speak to each other because one borrowed tools he never returned.

Many Hispanic families understand these types of gatherings as posadas. On each one of these nights, a different family holds the event. The nine days commemorates the nine months of Mary's pregnancy with baby Jesus. The word literally means an "inn" or some type of shelter, the same way in Mary's situation.

There is singing at Posadas, but there's always food, plus the social atmosphere is something like going to visit grandmother, and her warmness welcomes you. But don't forget the piñatas!

Each night is the same: singing, food, and piñatas.

Bethlehem

"I try to bring out my singing voice during [posadas], but sometimes it stays at home because it's so cold," jokes Cindy Abrego, an Arlington resident who travels to Fort Worth to participate in Posadas.

Days before Christmas, on a quiet night on the south side of Fort Worth, many of the city's Hispanic families have a different type of rush. As the taco shop and corner food store traffic on Hemphill Street begin to wane, you can see the neighborhood people that will go up to the houses with Christmas lights on the

front lawn and sing a variety of songs.

En nombre del cielo
os pido posada,
pues no puede andar
mi esposa amada.

The first stanza is meant for people to sing while outside a home and ask for a place to stay for the night.

Aquí no es mesón
sigan adelante:
yo no puedo abrir
no sea algún tunante.

Shortly after, the homeowners, who are on the other side of the door, respond that they can't let them in and tell them to move down the road. No, it is not a standard Christmas carol. These people are singing a reenactment of Mary and Joseph seeking shelter in Bethlehem, as she is about to give birth. The people on the other side of the door are the innkeepers of the story who reject Mary and Joseph any shelter.

People are wearing their thickest jackets and holding white candles, that's what the singing session is about.

Set the scene

Inside her home, Asunción is setting up her indoor Christmas lights and statue of the Virgin

Mary in the corner of her living room. Wearing a very traditional black scarf and black skirt, she says it is her favorite time of the year.

"It is all a blessing," she says, pointing to the various religious candles she has set up next to the statue. There is a table with red spheres and Christmas grass that spike your little fingers like pointy hay. Her sons' black and white pictures from their infancy are also one of the different items placed on the table. They won't get to see Asunción this year as they decided to save up money while in New Mexico, since their construction job has been slow. She knows, nonetheless, that she holds them close to heart and her many nieces and nephews will be there with her.

The decorations are pretty similar to the American decorations used for Christmas events. There are even images of old Saint Nick in his red jumpsuit and black boots on the front wooden door.

A common tradition

Griselda, a 23-year-old mother of twins, lives with Asunción, her grandmother. It is a little cold in Texas and Griselda is sporting a light green sweater and light blue jeans while she helps her grandmother decorate the rest of the living room with more Christmas lights and is setting up bowls of Mexican candy for kids.

She, along with her husband, Mauricio, makes piñatas from scratch at her juguetería, or party supply store.

In the backyard of their home, there are five-star piñatas with seven spikes covered in old newspaper clippings. These seven spikes represent the seven mortal sins in the Catholic religion. Next to them are shiny purple and green foils that will be placed over the piñatas in the following week.

“We tend to start [making piñatas] early because once December comes around our store gets lots of phone calls from people asking for piñatas,” she says.

She keeps a smile on her face and explains that she loves being able to be a part of the festivities by supplying neighbors and friends with partying supplies.

During each of the nine days of Las Posadas, there is a piñata being ripped by children holding a broomstick or even a bat at times. Once they do break a piñata open, they run like hungry kids tearing apart the spikes and filling it up with bubblegum or some of the red sour, chili powder candy that leaves a fiery sensation on your tongue, but is sweet as sugar because it practically is. Unlike birthday parties, children are hardly ever blindfolded, but they do swing like they are trying to hit a ball out of the Globe Life Park in Arlington.

“Hit it, hit it, hit it,” Griselda mimics.

In modern day Posadas, the piñata session is usually at the end of each of the nine nights. And even with that event, the hosts still give out white plastic bags filled with sweet and sour candy to the attendees; they may even throw a cookie or hot tamale in there.

Something different

The neighbor, next door to Asunción, is sweeping some leaves that the wind blew off. There is a nice chill in the air, and Reynaldo Arias keeps warm with a brown leather jacket.

Every year, Asunción invites the neighbors from her street over when it is her turn to hold the Posada event. Reynaldo never misses out.

With a grin on his face widening his thick mustache, he explains that for him, the best part of the Posadas is the different kinds of free food available.

He recounts how there would be chile verde tamales, or tamales filled with slow roasted shredded pork in green chili sauce, on the dinner table. Giving those a bite will set your taste buds on a journey and maybe a quench of thirst for water.

They remind me of warm fire that my grandfather in Mexico used to make when I was young.

There is also champurrado, a warm and thick Mexican drink that resembles hot chocolate, which comforts you like a welcoming, soft fleece blanket.

“Just walking in a home and you smell warm buñuelos that have a weird resemblance to the state fair fried dough, Dios mío they’re delicious,” he says.

Buñuelos are usually sprinkled with white sugar, and when you take a big bite, the crunch resonates through your mouth and out your ears that you forget how easily crumbs break off.

Reynaldo’s wife, Maria Luisa, explains that besides tamales and buñuelos there are also sweet bread and even tacos at times. One of the classic food staples at Posadas is menudo or what some people describe

as cow stomach. Upon hearing cow stomach, one might turn away, but not so fast. There is a wonderfully aromatic and tomato-like soup color as it is poured on a plate. The flavor is reminiscent of tortilla soup, but to most first timers, when it touches your taste buds, the chunks of cow tripe will have a rubbery, chewy texture.

In the cold, next to her husband, she is dressed in a gray sweater and black sunglasses.

“Muy Bueno,” she says with a smile.

Though these are only some of the people that celebrate posadas, they are rough all the same across the Hispanic communities not just the United States, but in select Latin American regions like El Salvador and Guatemala.

The important thing to remember is that whether it is Christmas or Posadas, people gather to celebrate something that is close to home and it is about being next to people you care about.

“It strengthens the bonds between people in a community during a time of the year that deals with giving,” Asunción says.