

## Health Fair

***Caring for those with no health insurance. Seventeen organizations and movements make a difference at a health fair in San Diego.***

*By Susanne Janssen*

It's a sunny morning in the Martin Luther King Jr. Park in San Diego, a green area that is the central recreational site in the neighborhood. It is home especially to disadvantaged families who, at the end of the month, have little money left. Meals tend to be low cost — burgers, fries, and no fresh fruit or vegetables.

Unfortunately there's a price to pay in the long run for nourishing your body in that way. The health fair going on in the center is an opportunity to help people in such neighborhoods and offer advice to workers with no health insurance.

The Focolare community had organized one such fair in Madera, a town in California's Central Valley, where immigrants, primarily from Mexico, work in the fields without health insurance. Many received a quick checkup and explored the possibilities of healthcare. Nutrition experts gave information about a healthy diet, a dentist taught the children the right way to brush their teeth, and doctors and nurses gave blood tests and informed people about their risk factors. An immigration lawyer tried to resolve serious problems with their documentation.

In San Diego, the Focolare community, though not numerous, was eager to take similar action. "We wanted to do something concrete," says Ester Herrera, administrator in a nonprofit agency. Organizing a health fair on their own seemed, however, a bit much. Herrera told a friend, the wife of the Imam of the Taqwa Mosque in San Diego, about their plans. As she is a nurse, she immediately thought of other nurses who live in the community. "They would love to help us," she said.

A meeting was held and a plan was born. Someone knew a person who takes care of the hospice in San Diego. Someone else was in contact with an organization promoting healthcare for children and diabetes prevention, and so on. In the end, 17 groups were involved, including the Community Health Group, the National Association for Mental Illness, Project Heart Beat, the Scripps Whittier Diabetes Institute and representatives of senior centers.

A date was set and an invitation went out. "We met several times, and the planning of it was an opportunity to build a stronger rapport: to listen to each other's ideas and make decisions together," said Herrera. She and Darleen Fardan, chair of the San Diego Black Nurses Association, were the central coordinators of the Health Fair. "It was a beautiful experience. Every time we had to face a problem, the right person offered help," Fardan said. The goal of promoting a healthier lifestyle and giving concrete help attracted a lot of volunteers, including helpers in the kitchen, for instance, who cut fresh fruit and vegetables the entire day, and a woman who offered a short introduction on first aid.

On the day of the health fair, around 40 people attended. They had their blood sugar measured, got information about their blood pressure and were informed of the danger of obesity. In a friendly atmosphere, no one felt judged, but all felt understood and loved.

"I never wanted to know my blood sugar," said a woman in her fifties. "I have to lose weight, but now I've got good hints to sort things out."

Herrera and Fardan were pleased with the results. "It was a success, and we should repeat it," was Herrera's conclusion. More people would come because now it's known in the

neighborhood. Fardan emphasized, “Together we can learn from each other, and we can make a difference.”

A 16-year old, who came out of curiosity, was touched by the way people were working together. “I want to know more about you, because I want to help other people in my life instead of wasting time with stupid things,” she said.

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