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Hundreds gather to remember Mary and Joseph's search for shelter

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By Anthony Watt, awatt@qconline.com

In the days leading up to Christmas, many remember the trials of Mary and Joseph before the birth of their child — a celebration called Las Posadas.

Sunday, several hundred people of many backgrounds had a chance to experience Las Posadas — a traditional part of the Christmas celebration in Mexico — at the Quad City Botanical Center, where Hola America Media Group, Ascentra and the Botanical Center held their third annual celebration of the holiday.

"It represents the Virgin Mary and Joseph asking for a place to stay the nine days prior to the birth of Jesus," said Tarsicio Macias, of Hola America.

A big feature of the event was pinatas, including one in the form of a red-and-purple creature that looked like a cat — Hello Kitty's gaudy cousin, perhaps. The cat-creature's face was fixed with a permanent smile, and its body was fixed with a tether. Volunteers used that tether to spin and bob the pinata as child after child stepped up and attempted quite literally to whack the stuffing out of the cat-creature with what looked suspiciously like a shovel handle wrapped with ribbon.

The determined children soon made several gaping holes in the little cat-creature, and, when those were big enough, Mr. Macias turned the mortally wounded pinata upside down. The cascade of candy was met by a tidal wave of children who scooped the treats up in seconds.



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Photo: John Greenwood

The Quad City Botanical Center in Rock Island hosted a Posada Navidena Mexican holiday celebration on Sunday afternoon. Included were music, the breaking of pinatas and food. In the photo, 8-year-old Bryan Figuera, of East Moline, whacks the pinata, attempting to break it open so the candy and other goodies inside would spill out onto the floor for all the children to gather.



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Photo: John Greenwood / staff

The Sierra family has celebrated a traditional Posada Navidena holiday celebration for more than five decades. Five of the original seven families participated in the Mexican festival Sunday evening in a Silvis home. With rosary beads in hand, prayers were read and songs were sung, with young and old participating before a feast of chili and treats was

This happened again, this time to a spherical served. pinata adorned with conical silver and purple party hats that gave it the overall appearance of a star.

The event at the Botanical Center was a more general holiday celebration than a traditional Posadas event and included elements of other versions of the Christmas celebration, Mr. Macias said.

Santa Claus, attended by several young elves, sat next to a Christmas tree across the room from the pinatas, taking orders for Christmas Day.

And "Jumping George", Ascentra's Frog mascot, was also there wending its way through the crowd, dancing to the blend of pop music and Christmas tunes that filled the room. It wore a red Santa Claus hat and a T-shirt that said "Hoppy Christmas."

"I think they love (the frog) better than Santa," Mr. Macias said.

Besides the candy, there were tamales, hot chocolate and other treats.

In the more traditional form of Las Posadas, many of the elements take the form almost of a play.

Mr. Macias said that in the days leading up to Christmas, the different families in a neighborhood take turns having their homes represent the stable where Mary and Joseph ultimately would find shelter.

Other people, representing the wandering couple, go to other houses before the chosen one and at each of them are refused before at last being accepted at the home representing the stable.

At each stop, the participants sing. The procession asks for shelter, and the people at the first few homes sing a refusal. At the final home, the people sing a chorus that represents an acceptance of the couple.

Everyone comes in and takes part in prayer, singing, food and, yes, pinatas.

There is usually a star-shaped one that represents the Star of Bethlehem, Mr. Macias said. That was the role the silver-and-purple pinata played at the Botanical Center.

Hours after the party at the Botanical Center, the Sierra family celebrated Las Posadas in a different way.

Dozens of people crowded into a cozy Silvis home and, sitting elbow to elbow, recited prayers and sang songs in Latin, Spanish and English.

Rachel Sierra translated part of the song (sung in Spanish) in which Joseph and Mary are allowed to take shelter: "Holy Mary, sacred dove, a tender welcome we give you from our hearts."

Though more solemn than the earlier event, the Sierra's celebration was still filled with the laughter of many children and featured plenty of food.

The Sierras have celebrated Las Posadas this way for decades, said Teresa Cervantes.

"We're hoping to keep it (as a tradition)," Ms. Cervantes said.