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New group Palenke Arts wants to build a multicultural arts center in Seaside

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Seaside >> A new organization is working to create a multicultural arts center in Seaside, and it's introducing itself to the community with a free festival in Laguna Grande Park on Saturday.

Palenke Arts boasts a name worthy of its mission. It's mainly a reference to the Spanish word "palenque," a kind of arena where performances happen, but it's also the name of an ancient Mayan city in Mexico, a type of public market in the Philippines and a community of free slaves in Colombia and Cuba.

Such diversity is the goal of the organization, which aims to foster a vibrant and inclusive community through music, dance, spoken word, digital arts and other forms of expression.



It's the brainchild of Juan L. Sánchez, a musician, teacher and community organizer who has lived in the area for about 25 years.

"I always saw a need in this area for a multicultural arts center," he said, especially for young people. As the Oldemeyer Center shifted from a youth center to more of a senior center, something was lost, he said.

"One thing that's clear to me is that our youth need as many sources of inspiration as possible," he said. "... Music and art and dance, they're just wonderful ways of making these kids feel like they have a purpose."

To make sure he wasn't dreaming up a center in a vacuum, he interviewed dozens of stakeholders in the community, including city and school officials, and surveyed 145 students at Seaside High School. The interest was there.

The project now involves a core team of artists, musicians, educators and advocates from CSU Monterey Bay, the Monterey Jazz Festival, the Monterey Peninsula and Pacific Grove unified school districts and Seaside High.

"This should be owned by the community," Sanchez said. "The real projects, the ones that have the most impact, are the ones that are owned by a lot of people. So I want to invite a lot of people to the table."

That's one of the goals of the first Palenke Arts Festival.

"The idea for the festival is to kick off the organization, to share the vision with other folks and people who might want to assist us, perhaps get donations, but more important to see if there's a consensus that this is really an important idea," he said.

The Monterey Jazz Festival helped arrange a free performance by the award-winning Mariachi Nueva Generacion from Texas State University, as well as the university's Latin jazz ensemble, Salsa del Rio.

The jazz festival's High School All-Star Band and Seaside Middle School Jazz Band will also perform, and there will be salsa dance classes and children's activities.

For now, a physical center is a long way off. But Sanchez envisions a facility that features a performing arts center, classroom, office and rehearsal spaces, a small art gallery, a recording studio and a computer lab.

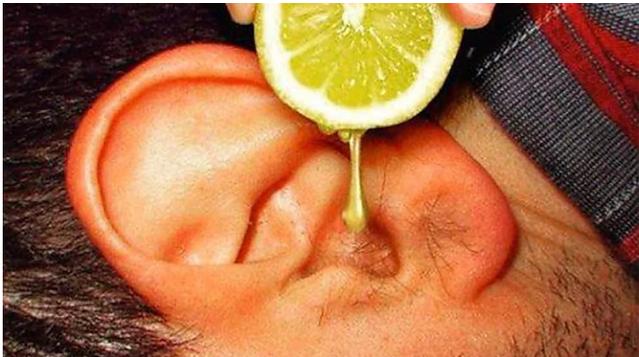
"We don't want to do things people are already doing, so it would really need to be a special one-of-a-kind place," he said, "a safe space for the wonderfully diverse population of Seaside."



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