

PHOTOS: First Night Monterey hosts thousands for New Year celebration



Families were able to take a photo with a First Night Monterey background with their cellphones. There was also a booth for people to create their own resolutions or wishes for 2024 and posted them to a large community wall. (Kyarra Harris/Monterey Herald)

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MONTEREY — Thousands filled Alvarado Street Sunday night to celebrate the New Year with family and friends as Monterey’s downtown area was transformed into an arts festival. The 31st annual First Night celebration hosted dozens of performances, vendors and musical guests throughout the evening, welcoming people from all over the country.

This year’s theme was “Together in Monterey” and Ellen Martin, executive director of First Night Monterey said the theme was an ode to the city of Monterey and its residents’ different cultures.

“People have been so happy and grateful to have this event going on,” Martin said. “We’re so proud of 31 years, family celebrating together is what it’s all about.”

Performances varied from African drumming, lion dancers, live bands, improv shows and more. Guests could walk around from venue to venue watching different shows. From 3 p.m. until 5 p.m. there were a lot of kid-friendly activities like face painting and making hats out of paper bags. Adults got in on the fun too, making their own hats and creating resolutions to post on a community board.

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A performer dances with flames in front of a crowd on Alvarado St. Flashpoint Entertainment put on several shows with fire, LED lights and music. (Kyarra Harris/Monterey Herald)

“We pride ourselves on the family-friendly aspect of the festival,” Martin said. “If parents wanted to go to a bar tonight, they wouldn’t be able to bring their kids. So this atmosphere provides something for everyone.”

People of all ages were in attendance from young and older couples to large families with children. Some came in groups to kick off their evening before traveling elsewhere, and others made First Night their final stop for the evening.

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Michelle Lee, an events director, traveled from Idaho with her family for First Night. She’s a graduate of CSU Monterey Bay and even participated in the graphic design class that First Night works with to select a student to create the poster of the year.

“I worked for First Night 20 years ago in college and it had a huge impact on my life as a producer,” Lee said. “I even saw a band that I saw 20 years ago. Seeing the work that goes into this event from the volunteers to the sponsors to the musicians, this is what Monterey is.”

Lee brought her 6-year-old son to the event as well and said he enjoyed himself being able to make crafts and wear attire that lit up for the new year.

“We traveled here from Boise, Idaho with family and even stayed at the Portola Hotel,” said Lee. “I wanted to show my son an art festival produced by Monterey.”

More than 60 volunteers helped put together the event in addition to the staff of First Night Monterey. Dot Findlater, a first-time volunteer of First Night said she moved to Monterey a couple of years ago and was looking for a way to fit into the community.

“This is my first year, but I’ve met people who have volunteered for the past 20 years, it’s pretty amazing,” Findlater said. “These volunteers come in, give up their days, help set up and they’re all so happy about it. The community really comes together here. You see children, families, young couples, I just really love the community activity.”

Some acts and performances have returned year after year for First Night in a tradition that’s lasted decades, but there are new faces each year. Martin said she’s proud to be able to have a space for people to get their name out.

“People have asked to perform at First Night Monterey and have ended up getting some exposure,” Martin said. “I’m also very proud of the fiscal impact First Night Monterey has had. There are so many small businesses that benefit as well.”

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