

First annual Pasko Expo celebrates Filipino culture

By **LANZ CHRISTIAN BAÑES/Times-Herald staff writer**

Posted: 12/14/2008 02:03:35 AM PST

Roel Almares sought to bring a taste of the way Christmas is celebrated in the Philippines – and he believes he did just that Saturday at the first annual Pasko Expo.

"Yes. Yes, yes, yes," Almares said enthusiastically as he surveyed the crowd of hundreds that milled about Expo Hall in the Solano County Fairgrounds.

Almares is one of the founding members of Phase1 Entertainment, which organized the event.

The daylong expo – part concert, part fair, part cultural education – featured a variety of vendors and entertainers that sought to appeal to all age groups.

The crowd – many still ecstatic over Filipino-American Manny Pacquiao's decisive defeat over Oscar de la Hoya last week – could buy shirts featuring Filipino national hero Jose Rizal to 4 Corners, a singing group composed of four Vallejo women.

The hall was decorated with traditional parols, or Christmas star-lanterns, and Filipino food was ubiquitous, as were shouts of "Maligayang Pasko" – Merry Christmas.

Initially, organizers feared low attendance, said Anna-Mae Edpao, also of Phase1 Entertainment.

"But there are still people coming," Edpao said.

The expo showcased various aspects of Filipino and Filipino-American culture, such as Vallejo-based Villasin Balintawak Arnis Academy, a Filipino martial arts school.

"This was what we used to fight against the Spaniards, against the Japanese, against the Americans – it was used to fight our enemies," said Mel Orpilla, local

author of "Filipinos in Vallejo" and member of the Balintawak Academy.

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The Philippines was colonized by Spain in the mid 1500s, then by the United States at the end of the 19th century as the result of the Spanish-American War. The Japanese seized the archipelago during World War II, with the country finally gaining its independence in 1946.

Several booths featured Baybayin, a pre-Spaniard form of writing.

The spidery 17-character alphabet is often called "alibata" after the Arabic alphabet because it was once thought to be of Arabic descent, said Christian Cabuay, who manned a Baybayin booth and had his name written in the script on his nametag.

But its true name is "Baybayin," Cabuay said.

"It's not a dead writing system," said Ray Haguisan, who sold handcrafted pendants with Baybayin script on them. "It's alive and well because there are still three tribes in the Philippines that write in it ... and we Filipino-Americans keep it alive."

The writing could also be seen at the booth of Ben Valdez – better known as Monk.

Monk owns and is an artist at 4 Zero Eight, a San Jose tattoo parlor at 944 E. Santa Clara St. He regularly features Baybayin at his shop.

"I would say 97 percent of the Filipinos that come in to get alibat, they do it because it's part of their roots," Monk said.

Monk began introducing Filipino and Polynesian elements into his artwork in 2005 so he could reconnect with his Filipino heritage.

In addition to providing a glimpse of Filipino culture, Pasko Expo also raised money for the Pilipino Youth Coalition of Vallejo and Gawad Kalinga, a charity that builds houses in the Philippines and attempts to provide Filipinos the means to raise themselves out of poverty.

"We do more than just build houses," said Bong Bermudez of Gawad Kalinga.

Gawad Kalinga is a growing volunteer organization whose operations have not been affected by the current



Jacqueline Castillo, 6, of Vallejo works on a traditional Christmas star, trimming away excess from the center piece, at Saturday's Pasko Expo at the Solano County Fairground's Exposition Hall. The Expo involved elements of Filipino culture and Christmas tradition and included vendors, crafts, food and performances in the first celebration of its kind in Vallejo. (Mike Jory/Times-Herald)

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economic state, Bermudez said. Originally relying on individual donations, the group now has corporate sponsors that underwrite the cost of building houses and educating their inhabitants.

"We have a motto: 'Less for self. More for others. Enough for all,' " Bermudez said. "We truly believe in that."

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