



Community members gathered for 18th Tree of Life Ceremony

Event remembers those who have been affected by HIV/AIDS

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Photo credit: Ricky Cervantes

Over 200 people gathered Tuesday at the Village Hillcrest plaza for the 18th Tree of Life ceremony. The annual event commemorates World AIDS Day and serves as the official lighting of the tree. The Tree of Life ceremony is organized by Mama's Kitchen, an organization that provides meals and services to those living with HIV/AIDS.

As participants arrived, the approximately nine-foot tree was dark. Those in attendance were given the opportunity to purchase ornaments in honor of a friend or loved one that has been affected by HIV/AIDS. Proceeds from ornament sales will go back to Mama's Kitchen.

After welcoming remarks by dignitaries such as State Senator Christine Kehoe, City Councilmembers Todd Gloria and Carl DeMaio, County Supervisor Ron Roberts, and Mayor Jerry Sanders, the tree was lit. Audience members cheered as the lights came on, but it was a somber moment for many.

Robin Sherman, a San Diego coffee roaster, has attended the event for the past couple of years. "I have lost five friends to AIDS and I miss them every day". The lighting ceremony gave Sherman a chance to remember her friends.

Mama's Kitchen has made a commitment to be there until HIV/AIDS no longer exists. Said Alberto Cortes, Executive Director of Mama's Kitchen, "I promise to continue the fight against this pandemic as long as it takes by providing nutrient rich meals to the community."

In response to recent cuts to HIV/AIDS funding in the state of California, elected officials gave various promises to the crowd. Kehoe, who has attended every single Tree of Life event since the event began 18-years ago promised to restore funding by next year, but noted that doing so will not be an easy task.

Roberts commended Mama's Kitchen for the tremendous service they provide to the HIV/AIDS community, even in these difficult financial times. He noted that the organization achieves "measurable results" and thanked the hundreds of volunteers who work every day to support the mission of the agency.

Gloria, who encouraged the crowd to "think globally and act locally", reminded people of the small things they can do that make a big impact. He emphasized the importance of getting tested for HIV.

The diversity of the crowd was evidence of a growing awareness of the virus by people from all walks of life. Nikki Tovar, a 15-year Escondido resident enjoys the event “because everyone was so joyful and happy.” She took the opportunity to celebrate the lives and souls of those who have passed and support those who are living with HIV/AIDS.