

THIRD ANNUAL GARDEN STATE LATINO FESTIVAL IN LAKEWOOD

By: Victoria Ford



This October, 3,000 to 4,000 people are expected to gather at the Lake Terrace banquet facility in Lakewood to celebrate and savor the colors, sounds and tastes of the Latino culture during the third annual Garden State Latino Cultural Festival.

The all-day event is organized by the National Association for the Advancement of Latino People, founded and run by Jorge and Betty Rod. They started the organization in January 2014. Jorge Rod also publishes *Latinos Unidos de Nueva Jersey* – a Spanish language newspaper started in 2003 with distribution now numbering near 42,000 monthly, in 80 towns and 37 schools (lunj.net) – and The Jewish Journal (ocjj.net).

The Hispanic population is growing, with 65,000 in Ocean County and 80,000 in Monmouth County, according to Rod. An estimated 6,500 Latinos in Ocean County are seniors, many of whom have lived in the States 25 years or more but still struggle with English language; many need nutritional counseling, meals on wheels, mental health services, and more. The NAALP is working on a program to start uniting area pastors and churches, Rod said. The NAALP is the link that puts people in contact with the right resources, Rod explained.

The fall festival runs from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and is free to enter, with games and activities for kids; guests should bring spending money for food and raffles. (Food vendors' prices are capped at \$7 a plate.) Half a dozen different bands will perform throughout the day. The event blends and highlights various Latin American cultures, including countries of South and Central America, Mexico and Cuba. The festival raises several thousand dollars to support the work of the organization throughout the year.

In January, the NAALP moved into its first real office space, at 101 Prospect St., Suite 204, in Lakewood, through a lease agreement with Barnabas Health. Previously the Rods had run the organization from their home in Jackson, but a proper office – 700 square feet now in which to work year-round with a core group of 15 volunteers, and being able to fund it with the festival money as well as a \$1,000 grant from the Cultural and Heritage Commission and a \$1,000 Community Development Block Grant – enables them to serve the community in many new and different ways, Jorge said.

The Rods have lived on Ocean County 48 years, both in Lakewood and Jackson; Jorge served on the Lacey Township Committee for three consecutive terms and held the office of mayor in 1981. He served two terms in the New Jersey State

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General Assembly and was the state's first Hispanic legislator.

The NAALP has some seed money, raised through the previous two festivals, both of which were very successful, he said. By May, about 150 days out, organizers were beginning to gear up for the festival, ordering brochures and posters. The event is advertised throughout Ocean, Monmouth, Middlesex and Mercer Counties, the same distribution area as Rod's publications. Exhibit tables are available at \$300 apiece. Last year's event had 56 tables and many have already signed up for this year. Additionally 160 artists and over 100 volunteers participated. Sponsorship opportunities and spaces in the ad book are also for sale. Call 732-415-8303.

One of Rod's favorite things about the festival is the diversity of people it attracts – many non-Hispanics, interested in eating the food, enjoying the music, taking in the sights, the beautiful traditional ensembles, and learning about the culture.



Garden Latino Cultural Festival.
Photo credit: NAALP

But education is the festival's major impact and most important take-home message, he added. The event strives to cultivate awareness and understanding, within and outside the Latino community. Rod sees a tremendous value in a six-hour event full of entertainment and enrichment. Some of the youngest participants, born in this country, are separated from their heritage, their roots, and this event puts them back in touch. Organizers encourage students to attend and write essays for extra credit.



Garden Latino Cultural Festival.
Photo credit: NAALP

The organization itself has a many-sided mission, which includes helping the Hispanic community not by reinventing the wheel but rather by “connecting the dots,” Rod said, from boater registration to consumer fraud protection. There are wonderful volunteer agencies in Ocean County, he explained – services for

seniors, parks and recreation opportunities, 21 library branches rich in information and classes and activities, and Ocean County College, through which jobs and financial aid for continuing education are available. Mainly, he summed up, NAALP aims to educate the Latino community and make them aware of low-and no-cost services and resources are available.

