

Haley's Cove veterans celebrate Christmas in July

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Considering it's summertime in Florida, we can count on sizzling and steamy temps as we transition from our homes, work and inside play places to the outdoors.

But from the outside looking in on a recent Friday afternoon, few would have guessed a select group of invitees were experiencing a similar scenario in the Flamingo Way Café inside the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital.

In celebration of Christmas in July, residents of Haley's Cove, an on-site nursing home for veterans, were treated to the annual Senior Salsa Social, an event featuring high-spirited and forever hot south-of-the-border-style entertainment.

With roots in Cuban culture, salsa dancing incorporates spins, fancy footwork and smooth arm and hip movements and is popular among people of Latin American, Caribbean-American and Hispanic heritage.

Grace Badillo, an award-winning dance instructor with Dancing with Grace Productions, coordinated the event for the fifth consecutive year in partnership with Susanna Hargraves, a recreational therapist at the hospital's Life Enrichment Center. The all-volunteer event also was sponsored in part by the Black Dagger Military Hunt Club.

Badillo captured the undivided attention of a roomful of both male and female veterans, and had several of them swaying to the beat as she and members of the Madrin'ha Dance Company performed to the sounds of Somos Musica Orchestra.

Willie Matos, a retired New York City policeman who assisted in the rescue effort following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, served as the event's deejay and Ann Poonkasem, Miss Tampa 2001, sang Christmas carols and danced while holding hands with several men seated in their wheelchairs.



ABOVE: Award-winning dance instructor Grace Badillo, left, and Kyla Ross perform a dance number during the Christmas in July Senior Salsa Social at James A. Haley Veterans Hospital in Tampa. The party was for residents of Haleys Cove, an on-site nursing home for veterans. [by Joyce Mckenzie]



ABOVE: Willie Matos, a retired New York City police officer who assisted in the rescue efforts following the 9-11 terrorist attacks, served as a volunteer DJ during the Christmas in July Senior Salsa Social at the James A. Haley Veterans Hospital in Tampa. [by Joyce Mckenzie]

Karen Joseph, of Valrico, a 20-year Army veteran, also was among the dancers who interacted with and entertained the crowd. She's been a patient at the hospital many times due to complications from an autoimmune disorder.

"For me, it's very personal and it's an opportunity for me to give back," she said.

Jeff Parker, 90, an Army veteran of World War 1, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, was there to take it all in and was delighted by what he saw.

"It's really nice, and these girls knock themselves out," he said.

Army veteran Antonio Tibado, a native of Puerto Rico who spent 25 years in the service, has attended almost all of the Christmas in July events since becoming a Haley's Cove resident eight years ago.

"It's good and they are all beautiful ladies," said Tibado, while in the company of two of the women who'd surrounded his wheelchair. "I like to dance and they all ask me to dance."

And while Angel Rivera — also an Army vet born in Puerto Rico — is not a Haley's Cove resident, he is a patient at the hospital and he's attended the event for several years in a volunteer capacity.

"I think it's something we need to do for our veterans," said Rivera, a Tampa resident.

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ABOVE: Ann Poonkasem, Miss Tampa 2001, dances with her hand stretched out to a disabled veteran during the Christmas in July Senior Salsa Social at the James A. Veterans Hospital in Tampa. [by Joyce Mckenzie]



ABOVE: Attendees at the Christmas in July Senior Salsa Social, held at the James A. Haley Veterans Hospital, were treated to an array of entertainment and treats, including this aptly decorated cake created to fit the occasion. [by Joyce Mckenzie]