

Gala to help homeless people returns

By Ollie Reed Jr. / Journal Staff Writer

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Albuquerque hair stylist Joseph Saavedra is pumped about walking down the runway at the conclusion of the Pennies for the Homeless High Tea & Fashion Extravaganza in two weeks.

One reason is that the extravaganza, which raises money for Albuquerque's homeless, is back after a two-year hiatus, and Saavedra is eager to contribute to a cause he cares about passionately.

The other reason is that he can walk at all.

In August 2017, Saavedra was stricken by what he describes as a vicious virus. It disabled him. He couldn't talk or hold his head up. It was not certain that he would live long, much less walk again.

"I just started shutting down," Saavedra, 65, said. "I got septic. They did MRIs and CAT scans. I remember them saying, 'This one is going to tell us if you are going to be paraplegic or not.'"

But after 14 months in a hospital and rehab center, Saavedra is walking again. Not as well as he did before, but he's coming along.

"I lucked out and came back," he said. "I'm grateful."

Answered prayer



Joseph Saavedra, pictured here during a previous High Tea & Fashion Extravaganza benefit for the homeless, always concluded the program by walking down the runway. He hopes to do the same when he resurrects the extravaganza this month.

Saavedra started the nonprofit Pennies for the Homeless in 1993 with state District Judge Diane Dal Santo. At the start, the organization spearheaded drives to collect loose change for homeless people. The High Tea & Fashion Extravaganza benefit was added in 1998 and grew over the years, raising an estimated half million dollars to date for the cause.

“The first year at the (Albuquerque) Marriott. We had 75 to 100 people attend,” Saavedra said. “In November 2016, at the Hotel Albuquerque, we seated 600 people.”

But that 2016 extravaganza was the last one. Dal Santo died in 2015, and when Saavedra fell ill in 2017, there was no one to pull the program together.

He said that the return of the glamorous high tea and fashion benefit this month is an answered prayer.

“Be careful what you pray for,” he said. “It’s a lot of work. But it’s true giving. I am giving to people, the homeless, who have no way of giving back.”

Model search

The extravaganza raises money for programs such as Albuquerque Public Schools’ Title I Homeless Project, Healthcare for the Homeless and many others.

“We have 28 (programs) on the list, but we always give to APS’ homeless project and Healthcare for the Homeless,” Saavedra said.



Rodrigo Bunton Navarrete of Los Angeles is the guest designer at this year's Pennies for the Homeless High Tea & Fashion Extravaganza on Nov. 24. (Courtesy of Cuco Designs)

A highlight of the extravaganza is the top designers Saavedra brings in from out of state. This year, the guest designer is Rodrigo Bunton Navarrete, a native of El Salvador who now lives and works in Los Angeles. Saavedra said guests will not only have a chance to see and buy fashions designed by Navarrete but to meet him as well.

A new element this year, he said, is the Runway Model Search. Saavedra said those who have always wanted to do their thing on the fashion runway can, for a \$50 fee, submit an application and a nonprofessional full-body photo by Nov. 22.

Selected during a model call at noon Nov. 23 at the Turquoise Room of Hotel Albuquerque, the winning applicant will receive \$300 and participate in the Nov. 24 extravaganza. Go to www.penniesforthehomeless.org to enter.

“We hope we have plenty of girls show up,” Saavedra said. “The ones that don’t make the cut can become our hostesses and see the show. The \$50 entry fee benefits the homeless.”

Saavedra said nine other models, professionals from Los Angeles and Phoenix, will work the fashion extravaganza.

Walk on

Saavedra, an Albuquerque native and graduate of Albuquerque High, worked in California from 1985 to 1990, living in Palm Springs and doing hair and makeup for photo shoots. He said he worked with the likes of Barbara Sinatra, Gregory Peck, Jill St. John, Robert Wagner and Stephanie Powers.

Terrified by the earthquakes California is subject to, Saavedra returned to Albuquerque in 1990. He was moved to start Pennies for the Homeless when he saw the same kind of homeless situation he had been familiar with in California taking root and growing in Albuquerque.

As it turned out, Saavedra himself would be homeless for a time after suffering financial setbacks in 2008. And on top of that came his devastating illness in 2017.

It has been a tough road back. He is living in transitional housing and only recently started “dabbling back in” the styling business.

He usually walks with the aid of a walker. But he has higher hopes for his traditional walk down the runway to end his Nov. 24 high tea and fashion extravaganza.

“I’m going to go for it,” he said. “I’m going to walk, raise my arms and praise God.”

If you go

WHAT: Pennies for the Homeless High Tea & Fashion Extravaganza

WHEN: 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 24

WHERE: Hotel Albuquerque, 800 Rio Grande NW

TICKETS: \$65 individual, \$650 for table of 10. To buy tickets, go to www.penniesforthehomeless.org, click on “2019 Event” and then click on “Purchase Tickets.” Or call Joseph Saavedra at 401-6064.

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