Written by By Dee Velasco For the Sun
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As the sun begin to set in the western skies, the Cellicion Traditional Zuni Dancers closed out yet another momentous year at the Gallup Summer Nightly Indian dances with their Buffalo Dance.

Sponsored by the City of Gallup and the Gallup-McKinley Chamber of Commerce, the Nightly Dances have become a yearly tradition downtown at the McKinley County Courthouse plaza for surrounding Native American tribes to showcase their cultures through songs and dances.

Ending its 34th season, the Nightly Dances has continued to please not only locals but has thrilled more tourists than ever. Tourists came not only from North America, but from as far as Australia, Spain, Japan, Sweden, Europe, India, Netherlands, and other countries.

Director of Summer Nightly Indian Dances Teri Fraizer said the number of those who attended from out of the country was high, as she hopes next year will be even higher since new groups will be brought in such as: the Hopi Dancers, Taos Dance group, and the return of the Navajo Pollen Trail Dancers.

“I think the dances ran well, not too many rain outs,” Fraizer said. “I would like to commend the staff, the Chamber of Commerce Cecelia Perez, Bill Lee, Jennifer Lazarz … and thanks to everybody who attended the dances overall.”

A favorite to the nightly dances who opened as well as closed out the season, were the Cellicion Traditional Zuni Dancers, under the direction of Fernando Cellicion. He commented on the increase of tourists from outside the U.S.

“I think it was great and I noticed we had an increase in tourists,” he said. “The word is definitely getting out to all the tourists we talked to. It was good on our part since we had no cancellations due to the rain, which was great.”

Not only does the audience get to see the various performances, they can also take a stroll down the walkway and visit with local artisans displaying and selling their crafts. This can vary from silversmithing, pottery, paintings and much more. This gives the artisan the opportunity to showcase their talents.

Local Artisan/Vendor Chester Benalli said this year was a fun year overall as he sold his jewelry to many tourists out of the area.

“We had a really good turnout from the start. It was a really good summer for me, tourist wise

and sales wise," he said. "Hope it's the same next year and thank you to the city for getting out there to sell our jewelry."

Benalli said it was great as an artist to meet the customer directly and not have to go through a middle man.

"It was nice asking the customer where my jewelry is going and to have that artist to customer relationship, and actually meet the customer," he added.

Another integral part of the Nightly Dances are the staff who help in this yearly event, which includes those who provide local information to the tourists wanting to know more about the area, such as where to visit, what to see, and where to find the best red or green chili.

One of those staff members returning to the Nightly Dances is Ambassador Dawn Lujan, who says this year made an impression on her.

"It was great, the groups were good and the people really seemed to enjoy it," she said.

Another returning staff member, Emcee Brittney Garcia, said the number of tourists attending the events each night was phenomenal.

"I feel like we had more tourists, not local visitors, this year than in previous years," she said. "We seemed to consistently have people from a different country."

Garcia also said with the local ArtsCrawl moving towards the McKinley County Courthouse plaza, they enjoyed a greater audience size and perhaps that is something the Nightly Dances and ArtsCrawl should consider and work towards.

“Overall enjoyable and definitely a Gallup staple,” Garcia said.

One frequent visitor to the dances that has made Gallup her hometown is City of Gallup Tourism and Marketing Director Jennifer Lazarz, who says the dances are something everyone should experience.

“I think the dances are a beautiful part of Gallup every summer … they give the tribes surrounding us an opportunity to showcase that native culture is alive and well,” she said. “The non-native audience gets to experience something unique.”

Lazarz also said she is grateful for Fraizer and the Chamber of Commerce for helping coordinate the dances every year because it is an integral part of the tourism here in Gallup.

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