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and dads, grandpas and grandmas and sons and daughters meet up for their annual feast. Bellying up to the table at this dinner really does feel like settling in for a meal with your great big happy family.

This event always sells out, so you might be too late to get tickets at this time, but that shouldn't stop you from stepping out to support a cause this weekend. Over outside Angels Camp, Gina Galloway and Rayleane Dias-Gentry have conspired to cook up another down home feast and this one supports everyone in the county. The Santa's Express Dinner Dance helps provide holiday meals to hundreds of families in our midst, families that might otherwise go without during this season of excess.

Santa's Express has been helping families find holiday cheer for as long as I can remember. Today it's under the Resource Connection roof and a veritable army of volunteers stands ready to dole out turkeys and hams, stuffing and potatoes, veggies and desserts to those in need.

And there is need! There are 14 food pantries in the county assisted by the Resource Connection and staff – especially at the food bank in San Andreas (206 George Reed Drive, off Pool Station Road) – can even assist with filling out the reams of paperwork to get your family

Turkey in a Barrel Dinner

WHEN: Meet at 6 p.m., dinner at 7 p.m. Saturday

WHERE: Mokelumne Hill Town Hall, Main Street, Mokelumne Hill

TICKETS: \$15 for adults, \$10 for seniors and \$5 for under 6 at 286-1573

some help if you need it. On top of the pantries, the food bank sends a roving pantry around the county to stave the hunger.

Saturday's second-annual event is put together by Galloway and Dias-Gentry with the help of three high school students working on their senior projects. They've got quite an evening planned, with the crowd gathering at 6 p.m. for beverages (the Friends of the Calaveras County Fair pour a fine cocktail!) and dinner – catered by Cody and Tyra Dragmanovich – served at 7 p.m. The heels start kicking at 8

Santa's Express Dinner Dance

WHEN: 6 p.m. beverages and dinner at 7 p.m. Saturday

WHERE: Calaveras County Fairgrounds, Gun Club Road (off Highway 49), south of Angels Camp

TICKETS: \$20 with a new toy at 559-2733 or 743-6724

p.m. as the Fabulous Off Brothers perform live music for dancing. Of course, a silent auction runs throughout the event with drawings promising prizes.

Admission is \$20 plus a new toy. The toys are part of the Christmas presentation of goodies for families in need and they certainly make smiles appear. Nothing warms the heart more than seeing the face of a little boy or girl, usually at least slightly aware of the difficulties



Bill Cleveland, left, Michael Heffernan and Mike Brown distribute toys made by the Ebbetts Pass Elves to children as part of the Christmas Santa's Express distribution.

mom and dad face daily, light up when he or she sees the passel of presents in December. I've witnessed children looking back at their mothers, aghast, unsure of what to do; they've never known people to be so kind and they're shocked to learn that they can really do what the volunteer told them they could: "Pick something out." It's Christmas magic personified.

To get your tickets, grab those toys and call Galloway at 559-2733 or Dias-Gentry at 743-6724. Families in every corner of the county will appreciate you, even though you might not see the hopeful faces around the Thanksgiving table or on

Christmas morning.

Yes it's been another rough year. We've paid far too much for gasoline and seen our dollars buy less and less. Just think if your salary was cut in half or, heaven forbid, disappeared overnight; what would you do? Some of your fellow Calaverans have seen that happen and they can use a boost this season. Whether it's scarfing down turkey or donating canned goods and a few toys, make sure to share your bounty this year. The care of the community is sometimes all we've got.

Reach Mike Taylor at mtaylor@sierralodestar.com.

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Dinner theater helps kids act up



Tuolumne Talk

Harmony Wheeler

Dinner theaters might be a thing of the past – sort of like drive-in movie theaters. So it's refreshing for the nostalgic, entertainment lover like myself when one or the other shows up and suddenly seems new. Desserts and Disneyland were made to be once-in-awhile, heavenly treats. Dinner theaters and drive-ins were made to cater to an overall experience with a relaxing ambiance. Of course, they also come in handy for fundraisers like the upcoming Mountain Youth

and Community Theatre's (MYACT) third dinner theater experience, set for Friday night in Sonora.

Comprised mostly of younger theatrical talents, MYACT and its Hideout Program provide a positive environment for all ages to grow in, learn about and

experience the world of live performance. Several of its members – coming from after-school classes in costuming, acting and dancing – will perform a series of acts from 6 to 8 p.m. Friday at the MYACT Theatre, 14372 Cuesta Court, Sonora. The doors open at 5:30 p.m. and dinner – meat and vegetarian chili with cornbread made by family volunteers – is served at 6 p.m.

The acts include songs from popular groups and singers including Journey,

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Sierra Lodestar

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the Jonas brothers, Johnny Cash and more. Mark Kreuzer's Dancing Grannies – made up of teenagers from his Mountain Oaks Charter School band class – are set to appear, too. Kandas Wright, the coordinator of the event, said Kreuzer will sing lead vocals and play the drums on music ranging from pop to punk rock.

Performers for the evening have been rehearsing once a week for an hour and a half for about two months and were given the freedom to choose their own songs to sing, which music teacher Kerry Ann then guided with help in vocal instruction and choreography.

"All of the money we raise from fundraisers, tuition and donations is used to put on a play and goes back to the projects we do with the kids," Wright said. "This fundraiser will fund the events in spring to kick off the new year of our group. The funds will pay for events such as the two weekend workshops we have in March, rent for our new location and classes in our after-school program. We have many events set up in spring, such as after-school classes and a theater workshop to start us early for the summer. Without the funds, the program would not be able to function."

Wright joined MYACT in 2005, when she volunteered to help wrangle kids to pass the summertime. Her sewing talents soon found a place within the group, and she has stayed active with the organization since.

"I really enjoy working with the kids and having an outlook for my creative side," Wright said. "The group gives kids the theater experience from auditions, rehearsals, building the sets, building costumes, dancing, singing and the tear-down after the show. The

Mountain Youth and Community Theatre dinner

WHEN: 6 p.m. Friday

WHERE: 14372 Cuesta Court, Sonora

TICKETS: \$10 for adults and \$8 for students and seniors at mountainyouthact.com

kids are a part of every step to create the theater experience. I think the thing I like most about being a part of this group is that it has become like a family and everyone is extremely supportive of each other.

"Our organization has seen many kids over the years offering an outlet for their creativity and the ability to gain lifelong friends. There have been many kids that come to the first few rehearsals being shy and quiet. By the end of the summer they are expressive and they have the self-esteem to show who they really are. The children gain so much esteem with showing their talents, having fun and gaining the support of their family and peers."

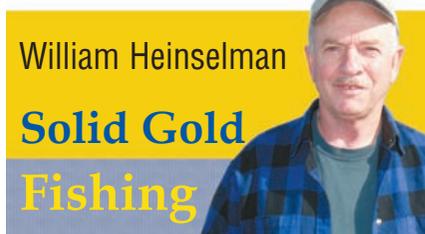
Send your Tuolumne County events to Harmony Wheeler at hwheeler@sier-ralodestar.com and mtaylor@sier-ralodestar.com.

This is a pair of anglers to draw to

Meet two of our area bass anglers: Alex Niapas of Angels Camp and Jerry Harvey of Valley Springs. These are just two ordinary guys who love to fish for bass, right? Well, think again when it comes to this dynamic duo; these two gentlemen rank as "elite anglers" because they know how to consistently track down and catch monster bass! Alex and Jerry are highly successful bass tournament anglers; they have earned the Angler of the Year Award three times to prove it.

The lakes they have competed at include (but are not limited to) Oroville, Clear, McClure, Don Pedro, New Melones, New Hogan, Pardee, Camanche and Amador. As a team, Alex and Jerry have placed in many tournaments. Not only have they placed, but they have won first-place in several outings, in addition to several second-place finishes. And big fish awards? Oh, yes, Alex caught two monster bass (weighing in at more than 12-pounds each) at a recent tournament at New Melones Reservoir.

Through a "tip" from my editor, I got right on the phone to possibly set up this story for you. Alex and Jerry agreed to the meeting and I was on my way to Jerry's home on



Halloween. Loving the sport of fishing the way I do, I was excited to meet this team that has achieved such success.

When I arrived, both Alex and Jerry treated me to two hours of pleasant and interesting conversation about their tournament trail. I could see right off that they both are truly "students of the game" when it comes to the sport of bass fishing; I noticed at least two-dozen plaques on the wall of Jerry's home, with several trophies, reels and pre-set rods near and on his fishing cabinet.

Jerry told me that he and Alex first met about 10 years ago, when they belonged to the Calaveras Bass Club.

"A friendship, trust, plus a mutual respect became between us and we have been enter-

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