

## Dating game benefits the poor

### 'Sort & Mingle' allows singles to mix at the food bank.

By Felicia Cousart Matlosz / The Fresno Bee

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The Community Food Bank is not your usual singles hangout, but the small, silver disco ball hanging from a yellow rope gives a hint that this is not your usual food-sorting session.

This is the first "Sort & Mingle" event, an opportunity to help the charity pack bags for those in need and maybe, just maybe, meet someone special.

Music is playing. An array of Mexican food and non-alcoholic beverages is set out on a table. In addition to that disco ball, a few flashing lights try to help set the mood.

Sarah Reyes, a former state Assembly member who is the food bank's chief executive officer, says before Wednesday's social that they got the idea at a conference in Los Angeles. Other food banks around the country have hosted these get-togethers, so why not here? To get the word out, they contacted people and organizations they know.

"I get to feed people, and hopefully somebody gets a date out of it," Reyes says.

About 30 people of different generations, women and men, show up for the event in the cavernous building in southwest Fresno. Across the room from the refreshments are big bins and a long table, where the volunteers will fill paper bags with canned foods and nonperishables. This, the food bank staff hopes, will encourage them to break the ice.

At first, they're all focused on the task at hand. Cans of beef stew and peaches fly into the grocery bags, with boxes of cereal and small bags of rice and other foods. By night's end, they will have sorted 10,304 pounds of food, a good effort for a group this size. The food will be taken to the Keenan Community Center in Huron.

But then a buzz begins to build. Chatter and laughter rise above the music. Maybe it helps that songs such as "That's Amore" by Dean Martin and "Gimme Some Lovin'" by The Spencer Davis Group play over the speakers. Or maybe it's Katie Johnson, the food bank's director of agency relations, picking up the microphone and asking, "You guys learning any names out there?"

Ed O'Connell, 60, a businessman from Fresno, says he's there to sort and mingle.

"I think it's a good way for people to get together under a nice atmosphere," says O'Connell, who adds that he's sometimes mistaken for retired KSEE, Channel 24, television newsman Bob Long. And he does bear some resemblance.

"No one has to impress anybody," O'Connell says.

And you might meet somebody nice, a reporter adds.

"You never know what life holds," he says.

Just down the row, Nick Napoletano of Fresno says he likes the event's combination of charitable work and singles' night. He's 26 and a draftsman for an architectural firm. He's looking for someone who shares his interest in giving back to the community and revitalizing downtown.

Oh, and "they gotta like rock 'n' roll, too," says Napoletano, who plays drums in a band named Electric Grease.

About 45 minutes in, Reyes says it's time for a break. Folding chairs are placed in a circle as people hit the refreshments. The affable Reyes, always at ease with people, takes on the role of activities director. It turns out there's a reason Johnson wanted them to learn names — they have to write down names of people they met from the opposite sex, testing how much they are really getting to know others.

As they take seats, a smiling Reyes scans the visitors to see who's sitting with whom and good-naturedly demands: "Sit with somebody you don't know."

The staff throws in a quick game of "Battle of the Sexes," from the board game, before it's time to get back to more sorting, with hopes that the mingling will be even easier.

Even some of the staff, such as 26-year-old Johnson, are here for both reasons.

Is it hard for singles to meet in Fresno?

"You can meet anybody, but it's hard to meet the right kind of person," she says. She's looking for someone who's intelligent, interesting to talk to, is physically active and enjoys the outdoors. And, of course, she's looking for someone who cares about the community.

Rosemary Garcia of Kerman says she's been a widow for 10 years. She's 55 and is an administrative partner for a Fresno hospital. She goes to singles' dances and thought this might be fun — certainly better than sitting at home.

And what is she looking for?

"My other half," the jovial Garcia says. "Somebody who will let me be me."

Reyes already has decided they will host another singles night. She's received calls from people who found out too late about this one and want to come to the next one. Reyes says it will be after the busy holiday sorting period. She thinks right before Valentine's Day will be a good date.

That way, she says, "maybe they can get dates for Valentine's Day."

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