

## Beaches

MIAMI BEACH

### Amigos for Kids event raises \$400,000

MORE THAN 2,000 PEOPLE GATHERED AT THE MIAMI BEACH CONVENTION CENTER LAST WEEKEND TO PLAY DOMINOES AT AN AMIGOS FOR KIDS AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM FUNDRAISER

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Synchronized dancers swirled and gyrated across a dance floor to pulsating techno beats. Grammy winner Jorge Moreno belted out his top hits.

Television journalists, musicians and politicians were among the crowd who tapped their feet. Few dared to dance.

Dozens of restaurants served up appetizer-sized servings of their entrees, but the stands serving drinks had the longest lines.

On a recent Saturday night, more than 2,000 contributors gathered at the Miami Beach Convention Center for an annual fundraiser for Amigos For Kids, a nonprofit based in Little Havana that funds programs for children.

Each paid between \$125 and \$1,000 to take part in ING Miami Celebrity Domino Night.

As the name implies, the big draw was the game -- those who paid \$1,000 had their own tables reserved with wooden box sets of dominoes.

But first there was socializing from business card exchanges to chats among friends and family.

Near the entrance, a pair of mayors greeted each other. North Bay Village's Joe Geller patted Hialeah's Julio Robaina on the back. Then, Geller talked about why he was there.

"I think this is a great cause for children who need help," he said. "Our government ought to be doing more for them."

The event also gave others an opportunity to promote their business.

South Miami chiropractor Raymond Ruskowski handed out business cards but noted that "it's the kids who brought us out here."

Pictures of smiling children the center helps were displayed on a large screen. At least one child was among the crowd.

Dan and Beth Levine arrived with their 8-month-old daughter Mia, who slept in her stroller.

"I'm not here to win. I'm here to have a good time and eat some pizza," Dan Levine said as he pointed to the Papa John's stand.

Wearing her sash, Miss Miami Beach was photographed pretending to take a huge bite of cheese pizza.

Levine asked the obvious question: Would the beauty queen actually eat it?

"I had three bites," said Michelle Piwko, 23, who has ambitions of being crowned Miss Universe.

The gala officially began at 8 p.m., but crowds began to pour in an hour later. Rosa Maria Plasencia, executive director for Amigos for Kids, said many were there on "Miami time."

By 10 p.m., ushers parted the long white curtains leading to the domino tables and people rushed to grab seats.

For Jose Muñoz, who was wearing a traditional four-pocket guayabera shirt, the game brought back memories.

"We played this with our fathers and grandfathers," the 50-year-old Muñoz, a carpenter at the University of Miami, said in Spanish.

By the end of the evening at 2 a.m., nearly \$400,000 had been raised for Amigos For Kids' free after-school program based in Little Havana.

Last year, the Little Havana agency donated 1,700 backpacks filled with school supplies to children in low-income households.

"There was a child who showed up to school with a Publix bag, three single loose [sheets of] paper and a pencil," Plasencia said.

She noted that showing up to school with a plastic bag sends a message to the child that he's not important.

"He needs to feel just like anybody else," she said.