

**NINA MOINI:** This weekend, the West Side of St. Paul will come to life with music, dancing, and colorful cars. The annual Cinco de Mayo event kicks off tomorrow with a car show and continues into Saturday with a parade and performances. Organizers of the celebration of Mexican culture say they want to lift people's spirits after a winter that was challenging for many in the community. Joining me now is Santino Franco, co-chairman of West Side Fiestas, the group behind the event. Thanks so much for your time this afternoon, Santino.

**SANTINO** Hello, thank you for having me.

**FRANCO:**

**NINA MOINI:** So 24 hours or so to go before the event gets started with the car show. I'm sure you've been putting many, many hours of hard work into getting ready. What have you been doing today in the final moments here to get ready?

**SANTINO** Well, I just got off work. We're down to said final day. So now it's a lot of phone calls, just making sure everything is where it should be. And thankfully, we are where we should be. And so we'll get the golf carts off today and pick up some radios and stuff like that. But all the heavy lifting is pretty much done.

**FRANCO:**

**NINA MOINI:** Nice, good for you. And some of the last minute details and running around, that's always a fun time. So I understand West Side Fiestas is part of a group called the West Side Boosters. Can you tell me about what these organizations do? What's your mission?

**SANTINO** Sure. West Side Boosters, we've been around since 1970. We do athletics for kindergarten through eighth grade.

**FRANCO:** This is a program that I've played in, my kids have played in, I've coached. I've been the president of the Booster Club. My son is the current president of the Booster Club. My daughter's coach.

It's a family thing, and not just my family, but a West Side family thing. 80% of our coaches have played in the program, and we do baseball, softball, basketball, football, ball, flag football. We offer athletics as a way to keep the kids busy, keep them off the streets, a lot of mentoring going on. And I said, it's been going on since 1970, and we're just carrying on the tradition.

**NINA MOINI:** That's incredible to be in the community for that long and to still be such a pillar. I mean, that's amazing. Can you tell folks who don't this area-- maybe they live farther away from the St. Paul area-- just like what West Side of St. Paul, West St. Paul, what it means to the Mexican-American community, the Chicano movement here? I mean, what does it mean to you? What does it mean to the area at large?

**SANTINO** Sure, St. Paul's West Side, we're the first Mexican community, very proud people over here. And we like to think of ourselves as maybe a little unique. There's a lot of old neighborhoods, but we've kept ours how it's been for many years. And the way we've done that is through athletics.

**FRANCO:**

The West Side Boosters keeps people who may have moved off the West Side, and now their grandkids are playing. They always come back on a Tuesday or a Saturday morning to come and watch kids. So it's a way we keep family together. We stay together.

And there's just our businesses. We have a lot to offer with our food and our shopping. It's a different experience than going other places. And we take a lot of pride. We had a West Side cleanup last weekend. And even all month, we've had guys cleaning up. And we just take care of our neighborhood. And we like to keep it like that.

**NINA MOINI:** There is so much good stuff going on and then so much history. But there have been challenges the last few months, in particular, with the surge of federal agents this winter. Of course, many immigrants, people of color were concerned that they could be stopped or detained. Businesses were closing their doors.

As you prepared for the event this year, did you go about anything differently? Or how, if in any way, did that impact this year's event and effort?

**SANTINO**  
**FRANCO:** Sure, sure. So this winter was a very long winter. A lot of us watched the doors at our local businesses. And some of us delivered food. But getting to the Cinco de Mayo, we talked about it as a committee, talked about it amongst some of us.

Do we want to do it? Do we just have a community gathering, how we were going to proceed with this? Our footprint has shrunk from last year, but it's still a good-sized footprint.

And we looked at it as, yes, the occupation is still here. It's not like how it was back in the winter, but we know it's still out there. But we're looking at it as a way to get the neighborhood together, bring other people in from other neighborhoods who have supported us all winter long and just say, let's let our hair down and have a good time on Friday night with the car show and then Saturday with the parade and all the festivities.

So a lot of thinking went into, should we do it? Should we not do it? But at the end of the day, we decided to. And we've had nothing but positivity. Everybody is looking forward to coming out on Saturday.

**NINA MOINI:** And just lastly, Santino, what experience do you hope that people walk away with this weekend from who are in attendance?

**SANTINO**  
**FRANCO:** What I hope they see is our culture. And when I talk about culture, I'm not just talking about the Mexican culture, the Chicano culture, the Latino culture. I'm talking about the culture of St. Paul's West Side, how you see just a rainbow of people that are getting along, having a good time listening to music, enjoying the food, just taking that away.

There's so much out there about inner cities and just the negativity. I want them to take away the positivity. I want them to see how we do things here and how much pride we have in our neighborhood. And I want them to take that away when they leave, to say, wow, I had a good time, and people are really good people.

**NINA MOINI:** Amazing. Congratulations, and have a great time this weekend. Thank you for stopping by the show.

**SANTINO**  
**FRANCO:** Thank you for having me.

**NINA MOINI:** Santino Franco is co-chairman of West Side Fiestas, the group putting on this weekend's Cinco de Mayo Car Show Parade and Festival.