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Holiday home tours raise money for county charities

By Marya Jones Barlow

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There are those who dread the annual chore of preparing their home for holiday guests. And then there are people like Eva Katz, who welcomes the prospect of opening her home to the scrutiny of as many as 3,000 visitors in a single weekend.

"We enjoy our house so much, and we're excited to be able to share it with others and help out a worthy cause," Katz said.

Katz's Thousand Oaks home is one of four that will be featured on a holiday home tour to benefit The Wellness Community Valley/Ventura.

Holiday home tours have become an annual fixture in the fundraising efforts of several Ventura County organizations and a popular holiday tradition for many local families.

Next month, three home tours benefiting local organizations are planned. In Camarillo, the Meadowlark Service League will host its 33rd charity holiday homes tour; in Westlake Village, Agoura Hills and Thousand Oaks, The Wellness Community will host its 20th; and in Oxnard, Heritage Square will hold its 18th Victorian Homes Holiday Tour.

"It's a kickoff to the holidays to get into the holiday spirit," said Peach Frazier, co-chairwoman of the Meadowlark Service League's "Homes for the Holidays" tour. "Some come for the decorations; some come for the beautiful homes."

"Homes for the Holidays," from 1 to 5 p.m. Dec. 4, is one of the Camarillo-based Meadowlark Service League's three annual fundraisers. Money raised from the self-guided tour benefits a variety of local charities and provides scholarships for high school students. Last year's fundraising efforts yielded $225,000.

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Frazier said this year's tour features four distinct homes with views of the Santa Rosa Valley, Topa Topa Mountains, pastoral farmlands and golf fairways. The homes' styles range from Spanish colonial to rustic mountain lodge to contemporary ranch to Polynesian. In addition to offering spectacular architecture, views and décor, each home will be decked out for the holidays and will host live music and drawings for prizes, Frazier said.

The tour runs in conjunction with a holiday boutique, which is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. in The Red Barn at Camarillo Ranch House, 201 Camarillo Ranch Road. The boutique will offer free refreshments and a variety of holiday gifts for sale.

Tickets can be purchased in advance for $25 from a Meadowlark Service League member, at several local stores or on the group's website. They also can be purchased on the day of the event at any of the homes or at Camarillo Ranch for $30. For more information, visit http://www.meadowlarkserviceleague.com/homes.shtml or call Terri Fortman at 428-4055.

The Wellness Community Valley/Ventura will host its 20th annual Holiday Homes Tour Dec. 3, and Dec. 4, at four homes in Westlake Village, Agoura Hills and Thousand Oaks. The self-guided tour is the group's largest annual fundraiser, with proceeds supporting free programs for cancer patients and their families.

Lyn Woodley, the tour's house manager chair, says the four sprawling homes represent a range of architectural styles, settings and interior décors. Among the highlights on this year's tour is the home of Arleen Scavone, owner of Sweet Arleens bakery in Westlake Village and reigning champion of the Food Network show "The Cupcake Wars." Tour participants will be able to see the kitchen where Scavone launched Sweet Arleens and sample one of her famous cupcakes, Woodley said.

"I think people like to see the huge houses, but equally, I think they find they can go into these houses and find inspiration for how to decorate their own homes," Woodley said. "People enjoy seeing how other people live. We try and get a balance so that the tour appeals to everybody."

Homes will have live music and opportunities to enter a raffle for two designer-decorated Christmas trees. A holiday boutique with more than 30 vendors will run both days from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. at North Ranch Community Center, 1400 N. Westlake Blvd.

Tickets, available by phone, online or at 14 locations throughout Ventura County, are $30 until next Friday and $35 at the door of any home during the tour. For more information, visit http://www.twcvv.org or call 888-557-3177.

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Heritage Square, Oxnard's downtown collection of Victorian-era homes, will hold Victorian Holiday Tours on Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Sundays, 1 to 4 p.m., from Dec. 3 through Jan. 1.

The 45-minute docent-guided tours offer visitors a glimpse of the homes and history of some of Oxnard's pioneer families. Eight of the site's historic tour homes will be decorated in themes from "The 12 Days of Christmas."

The tour begins at 715 South A St. in downtown Oxnard. Tour organizers suggest a donation of $5 to support Heritage Square's educational programs. For more information, call 483-7960 or visit http://www.heritagesquareoxnard.com.

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