

Iranian community starts celebrating

■ Persian New Year begins Monday

By Kate Stepanski

CORRESPONDENT

SAN FRANCISCO — Bay Area Iranians have let the countdown begin.

Norouz, which translates as "New Day," is fast approaching. In anticipation of the Persian New Year, members of the Iranian community are gathering to celebrate their culture in events that include traditional dances, poetry readings, comedy sketches and jumping over fire.

Beyond that, members of the Iranian community, including San Francisco State University's Iranian Cultural Club, hope to use the celebration of the Persian New Year to educate others about their culture.

Backlit by projections of sandstone, sunsets and ruins, Dr. Elahe Enssani, an adviser to the newly formed club at S.F. State, led a crowd of around 200 people Feb. 22 in the singing of "Ey Iran," the Iranian national anthem.

The singing launched the Norouz Festival, the first of many Bay Area events that will culminate at 10:35 a.m. Monday with the official beginning of Norouz.

At the vibrant Norouz Festival, members of the ICC set up a "sofreh haft seen," Farsi for "table of seven." The table was set with lavish tablecloths, seven items that begin with the letter S, and a goldfish in a bowl.

Traditionally, family members sit around the table and look at the fish, which is said to move at the turn of the New Year, symbolizing good fortune.

The crowd cheered and clapped to the beat of traditional music as three members of the Niosha Dance Academy, long-haired and dressed in showy traditional costumes — brightly hued in pink, orange, and blue — danced and waved their arms in the air.

Mohamad Ebrahimi read traditional Persian poetry in Farsi, including verse by the classic poet Saadi: "All human beings are different parts of the same

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SEPEDEH CIGARCHI (from left), Shadee Amirkiai and Kimia Mohammadi from the Niosha Dance Academy perform at the Norouz: Celebrate the New Year 1385 event at San Francisco State University.

STEPHEN TORRES-GREEN

Other events

Upcoming Bay Area Norouz events include:

▶ March 18: Norooz Family Festival, 1 to 4 p.m. Asian American Art Museum, 200 Larkin St., San Francisco

▶ March 26: Alborz Norooz Festival, 3 to 5 p.m. Camden Community Center, 3369 Union Ave., San Jose

▶ April 1, 2: Third Annual Norouz Festival, 10 a.m. at the Vasona County Lake Park in Los Gatos

body. No part will rest in peace if one is suffering."

The poem's sentiment lingered throughout the event. Proceeds were donated to the Rahimian Charity Hospital in Iran, which offers free medical care to the poor.

Between the artistic showcases, the most prominent member of the Iranian-American Bay Area community took the stage. Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi is the first Iranian American elected to local office in San

Francisco and, accordingly, spoke of the community's political role.

Mirkarimi said he recognized these are "turbulent times" for Iranians. Noting the potential power of the hundreds of the thousands of Iranians living in California, he urged audience members to become active in politics.

"Iranians are on the front burner for the international media," he said. Political involvement offers a chance to demystify who we are in the land of American politics. . . . Norouz is a milestone to pledge to that commitment."

Despite these concerns, the focus of Norouz is positive. Nellie Keyhani, ICC vice president, explained some of the aspects of "Norouz, (which) is not one day, but more like a month-long celebration with different rituals."

Among these are Eidi, the custom of giving money to family and friends. "They sign the money, and if you bring it back next year, they double the

money. Through the years it builds up," said Keyhani, who is saving up herself.

Another tradition, "deed-o-baz-deed," Farsi for "seeing and seeing again," is one of having tea, pastries, nuts, and conversation with people one may have lost touch with over the year.

Upcoming events include traditional fire jumping, which was to take place Tuesday evening. The ritual symbolizes new beginnings as each participant addresses the fire, saying, "May you take my yellowness and may I take your redness" as they jump over.

Some members of the community were expected to venture to the Persian Center near downtown Berkeley, a popular spot for the fire jumping event. The city blocks off a street for bonfires.

Others may have improvised with candles in their homes.

Enssani recalled, "In Iran we did the fire jumping in our own backyards. Everyone did it from the grandparents to the little kids."