

# Town honors 7 lives lost

Picnic draws 1,200 well-wishers to park

By Sarah Weld  
STAFF WRITER

EAST PALO ALTO — When the balloons were released into the afternoon air, a great cheer went up from the crowd below.

Inscribed with handwritten messages for the nine victims of April 26's East Palo Alto fire, the balloons carried the prayers and sorrow of the mourners toward heaven.

It was the most poignant moment in Thursday's otherwise celebratory feast of mounds of barbecue, pie and dessert.

Calling the event a community feast, local churches invited everybody to share in the tribute behind the New Sweet Home Church of God in Christ, where several of the fire victims worshipped. People flocked to the sunny yard following the morning's funeral for seven of the fire victims.

Two long tables groaned with donated food for more than 3,000 — barbecued chicken, ribs, carrot cake, cranberry pie, cookies and macaroni salad — that volunteers had been cooking for a day and a half.

"We got help from all the world and it's still coming," said Wanda Mosley, from Palo Alto, who was dishing out slices of pie.

If not for the tuxedos, Sunday hats and dresses, it would have been easy to mistake the cheerful feed for a simple celebration. But for many, the unity of East Palo Alto's African-American community and the chance for healing was indeed cause for celebration.

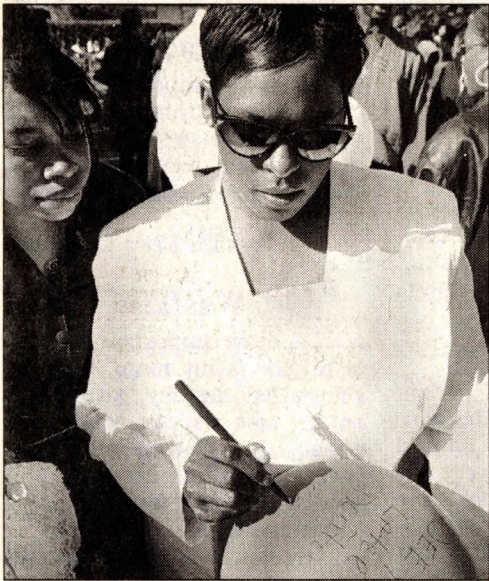
"It feeds the soul and gets everyone to laugh a little," said Steven Bibbs, 31, who lives next door to New Sweet Home and started cooking at 6 a.m. "God does love us no matter



Pastor Glen Mack (lower left) talks with Iola Glass (center) at the community picnic after the funeral for seven of the nine victims of the East Palo Alto home fire on April 26.

MATHEW SUMNER





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**Shirley Rayford — the daughter of Alma Campbell, who perished in the East Palo Alto fire — writes a farewell on a balloon.**

# Feast: 'Love for fellow citizens'

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what happens."

Watching the hordes move through the line, Bibbs said they would keep serving "until everyone's full or we run out of food."

Family members of the victims fresh from the funeral ate at tables in the sun, talking and smiling.

"I think this is great," said Elaine Thompson, whose granddaughter died in the fire.

"Everybody's been so thoughtful. This is like a larger scale of what we would normally have done," she said.

Many agreed that crises like the fire bring out the best in people.

They also mused that group gatherings like the feast should happen more often, not just in the aftermath of a tragedy.

"It's really sad that it takes a tragedy to bring people together. Now they've found out how much love they have for their fellow citizens," said Jerry Warmsley, who flew back from his military station in Germany for his cousin Donta Dorrale Price's funeral.

"We have to take back and renew our community," he said.

"Maybe it does take this kind of thing to bring that kind of an awakening to the community," said Don Ragsdale, a minister at New Sweet Home since 1975, as he took a break from serving food.

"And when you get all the churches together, it has a great impact on what the overall community needs — and that's change."

"We've got to move beyond this now," said Mayor R.B. Jones. "This thing has made a believer out of me that we can work this thing out."