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Family Free-For-All

You don't need funds to have fun in the Sun City

Story by Lisa Kay Tate

As a YMCA director in El Paso, Bruce Zahn knows plenty about family activities. And as the father of two boys and two girls, he's even more of an expert on creative and inexpensive things to do.

When his kids were young, family bike rides were a favorite way to get the kids to exercise and enjoy time as a family.

“Whether it was a Saturday morning bike trip for exercise and fresh air, or just a short trip during the week for some ice cream, getting on the bikes always seemed to energize the family,” said Zahn, executive director of the El Paso Y's Westside Branch. “I knew my kids enjoyed biking as they grew older, but it wasn't until they came home during their college's holiday break that I found out that they enjoyed riding behind me in their bike seat when they were little.”

A trip to the local farmer's market was another easy and cheap family outing with multiple benefits.

“Fresh air. Exercise. Fresh food. Local artists. Supporting local farmers. What a blast,” he said.

“If your older kids get antsy, give them a few bucks so they can go shopping on their own. It will teach them money handling skills and budgeting. For the younger ones, give them a digital camera and tell them to take pictures of what interests them. Back home, take the time to look at the pictures together. You will be surprised at what they find interesting, and at the beauty and quality of some of their pictures, too.”

And to escape the heat, there's no need to shell money for movie tickets. Every public library is nicely air-conditioned.

“On a hot summer day, when the sun is blazing and the temperature is in the triple digits, there is something very relaxing in going to the cool of the library and vegging out around some books,” Zahn said.

Families on a budget can follow Zahn's example and discover plenty of opportunities to entertain parents and kids at little or no cost during the summer. In addition to making their own fun, families can find free activities all summer long, and beyond, courtesy of city recreational and arts departments, museums, sports clubs and other organizations.

This summer, El Paso has countless choices of free concerts, cultural or sports events, arts markets and attractions, so not every family adventure poses a risk to one's wallet.

Music, movies and more

Outdoor music, theatre and movie series have long found their way into the regular summer schedule for area families, and the choices for this type of free event continue to grow each year. The City of El Paso is one of the best sources for free live music events during the summer such as the more adult-centered Alfresco! Fridays, but their most successful family series continues to

be Music Under the Stars at Chamizal National Memorial's Amphitheatre. Held Sunday nights during the summer months, this concert series includes both local and visiting performers. This year's season runs June 10 to Aug. 12 with Latin funk, oldies, salsa, bluegrass, swing, ranchera and a reggae tribute to the Beatles.

Kaycee Olsen, Downtown Arts District Coordinator, encourages families to make this event, now in its 29th season, part of the regular summer schedule.

"Music Under the Stars is a great opportunity to enjoy being outdoors this summer with your family," Olsen said. "It's a tradition in El Paso and would make a lovely addition to your summer family traditions as well."

Other live music presentations families can enjoy include the city's Cool Canyon Nights Thursdays through the summer at McKelligon Canyon Amphitheatre and El Paso Parks and Recreation Department's Melodies at the Park, a traveling outdoor concert on selected Saturdays held at various parks throughout the city.

Fort Bliss's Freedom Crossing also invites families to free monthly shows during the summer months with its "Let Freedom Sing" Summer Concert Series on the mall's event lawn featuring national touring artists.

"The series of four concerts will feature well-known artists for a summer of entertainment," Freedom Crossing spokesperson Danaria Farris McCoy said.

The series kicked off in May with country artist Robert Earl Keen and continues June 8 with rock/rap group Gym Class Heroes. The events are open to the public, but proper ID is necessary when entering the Fort and early arrival is encouraged to insure a good spot and allow time to stroll the mall.

Outlet Shoppes at El Paso has dedicated its Tuesday evenings to free family concerts in June and July. Other free music venues include both Zin Valle and La Viña wineries on weekends, and State Line Restaurant's Wednesday night series.

Free movies are also a way to get the family off the couch and under the stars.

The YMCA's Movies Under the Stars are held at 8:30 p.m. the first Friday of the month at the Loya Family YMCA branch, in conjunction with the First Friday Family Fun Nights, with free family movies shown on the outside of the building. The movies are open to the community, and guests can bring blankets, lawn chairs and movie snacks.

The Plaza Classic Film Festival also schedules some free showings in addition to its ticketed screenings. The festival often includes open house afternoons on selected days where families can enjoy the Plaza's Night Sky show, an organ concert and cartoons or other short films.

The Kern Place Association has been the source of free music and movies with monthly summer concerts and/or movies in Madeline Park each month in the summer and early fall.

When the summer months wind down, the Movies in the Canyon film series starts in weekends in September in October. Admission to these films is free as well, with food and drink for sale. UTEP again this year will offer a free Movies on the Lawn series showing PG or PG-13 movies on the Geology Lawn June 7-July 26 Zahn notes that these outdoor movies bring back memories of when "drive-in movies were a big family activity: A chance to see a movie without being crowded into a theater, the ability to walk around and stretch your legs and play, being outdoors."

Making the most of museums

From fine arts to history and science, El Paso parents can find occasions to tap into the area's cultural assets in a more economical fashion.

An interactive way to explore local museums as a family is the Museum Scavenger Hunt that runs mid-May through late July.

"There are wonderful things in the museums here, and in Las Cruces, which is joining us this year, and the Hunt is a fun way for families to discover places in El Paso that they may never have visited or even known about," said Marshall Carter-Tripp of the Border Museum Association.

Families can pick up free forms at any participating museum and visit at least 10 of the sites to find "mystery" objects. Once they turn in their form with validation from each visited site stating they found their objects, they can turn their forms in for a prize drawing.

Carter-Tripp said one of the best things is there is no age limit for the hunt that covers 20 participating area museums and historic sites including Concordia Cemetery, El Paso Museum of Archaeology, El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso Museum of History, Holocaust Museum, Insights Science Museum, International Museum of Art, Lynx Exhibits, Magoffin Home, National Border Patrol Museum, Old Fort Bliss Replica, Railroad and Transportation Museum, Tech2O Center, UTEP's Centennial Museum, Rubin Center for the Visual Arts and War Eagles Air Museum.

Carter-Tripp notes that not all the museums are free, but even those that charge admission are relatively inexpensive. Some, like the War Eagle Air Museum, admit kids free with adult admission.

"Families can do the hunt together and enjoy learning about all the cool stories in our museums and exhibit centers," she said. "You can complete the form and enter the drawing without going to any museums that charge."

Free events can also be found at museums and exhibit spaces that normally charge an admission. Lynx Exhibits, that boasts the distinction as the country's only museum dedicated solely to traveling and temporary exhibits, will enter its sixth year with its 18th exhibit, "Adventure Quest: Saving the Planet!" opening June 19.

The exhibit itself does have an admission charge, but Lynx co-founder Laurie Paternoster said the museum makes an effort to include events like day-long parking lot fairs with discounted rates, as well as additional cultural experiences through the El Paso Artisan Gallery inside Lynx Exhibits.

"The El Paso community craves family-oriented activities throughout the year and we love families at Lynx," Paternoster said. "We add local partners to every exhibit to educate our residents and to ensure that all age groups find something to enjoy. This year, we are providing several opportunities for free fun to make sure El Pasoans find quality time to spend together." Free parking lot fairs are usually held three times a year with each new exhibit's grand opening. The "Adventure Quest" Fair starts at 10 a.m. Tuesday, June 19, with free displays, activities, jumping balloon, food and prizes as well as booths by corporate or organizational partners that complement the exhibit's theme. Discounted admission to the exhibit is also offered that day. Always free is Lynx's Artisan Gallery and exhibit space open during regular museum hours that shows works by local artists, and often hosts themes exhibits in collaboration with the main exhibit. During the "Adventure Quest" run the gallery will host two exhibits, July's "Save The World" conservation-minded photographic exhibit and August's "Eye of the Beholder" juried

exhibition of works in found, repurposed or recycled objects.

Families can also take part in the summer-long interactive community-built recycled art piece. “Visitors are asked to bring clean milk or water jugs to add to our freeform artwork,” Paternoster said. “Contributors may hang their jugs as is, or use available materials to color them cut them into shapes. There is no fee to participate in this activity.”

This year, Lynx has received a Blue Star Museum designation, and will waive fees for all active duty military personnel and their families from Memorial Day through Labor Day this year. In addition to Lynx, El Paso’s Blue Star Museums either waiving fees or offering other free events for military include UTEP’s Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens, El Paso’s Museum of Archaeology, Museum of Art and Museum of History and Magoffin Home State Historic Site.

UTEP’s Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts organizes family workshops for children ages 4 to 11 and their parents that coincide with their summer exhibit. These are offered for free as long as families register in advance.

Markets and festivals

A new option for families is the Downtown Artist Market Saturday mornings in the Union Plaza area. In addition to being able to see works by more than 50 local artists, the markets sometimes includes extras such as children’s activities and live entertainment.

The Artist Market runs year round, but two of Downtown’s biggest free family events are in the spring and fall; El Paso Symphony Orchestra’s Kidspalooza held in March and MCAD’s Chalk The Block in October. Both events take place throughout downtown with free opportunities for families to explore visual arts, live entertainment, arts and craft, giveaways and more. There are some Kidspalooza events, including the family concert in the Plaza Theatre, that come with a ticket price, but families can still find much to do without charge. All Chalk the Block entertainment is offered free and open to all ages.

The Mission Trail area, including the ever-evolving San Elizario historic and arts districts, are filled with free family destinations and special events, including the 3rd annual Billy The Kid Festival set for June 8-10 throughout San Elizario with tours, reenactments, music and other events celebrating the notorious outlaw’s visit to the area.

There are also free family events each month during the spring, summer and early fall in the historic community including First Friday evening ArtWalks at 6 p.m. the first Friday of each month and monthly artisan markets on the third Sunday of the month

Arts Market representative Al Borrego said June’s market will include the unveiling of the next sculpture in the “History of San Elizario Historic District” Series, “The Ox” at the site of the Old Grist Mill on Main Street. The June 16 event also includes live music, carriage rides, concessions and a farmer’s market as well.

Always free in the district is admission to the Los Portales Museum and San Elizario Presidio Church. Entry to the Ysleta Mission and Socorro Mission are free as well, and the trail itself has several free family outings including browsing at The Bookery and visiting the petting zoo at Licon Dairy in Socorro and watching weekend Native American dances at the Tigua Cultural Center in Ysleta.

Check out the library

Keeping in touch with literacy skills during the summer is something the entire family can do, as well. The El Paso Public Library's summer reading program is free to participate in each year and encourages families to take advantage of not just literary opportunities, but family programming for all ages from magic to music.

The teen program in particular caters to a demographic that can sometimes be overlooked. The annual kickoff for the El Paso Public Library's Teen Summer Reading program, Teen Fest, is geared towards this group, but encourages participation from the entire family.

This year's event has moved to El Paso Public Library's Ysleta branch, with the theme "TSI: Realm of the Unknown," it will still have many of the elements that have attracted families in the past, such as music and food workshops, video gaming, movies, tournaments, arts and crafts and ghost-hunting presentations.

"This event is not only fun, but also educational and informative with local businesses and organizations offering support and specific programs and opportunities for El Paso teens," said Carmen Hernandez, Ysleta Public Library's Teen Representative. The 7-week teen summer reading program will follow the event at all local library branches alongside its counterpart, the Summer Reading program for kids.

Outdoor Opportunities

Summer is also a time when families can take advantage of free time to get fit, connect with nature and relish in the area's natural surroundings by finding free occasions to hike, camp or otherwise explore the outdoors.

Both the area YMCA and YWCA plan activities for sporting families throughout the summer. Returning for a second year is the YMCA's free Family Campout at the Loya Family Branch July 20. Zahn said the overnight event should have something for every family member.

"The evening begins with various activities and a Movie Under the Stars," Zahn said. "Then campers will participate in exciting special activities and games, a late night under the stars dip in the pool, then relaxing and having fun playing games or sitting around the campfire."

For the campout, families do need to provide their own dinner, breakfast and camping equipment, but all activities are free for those who pre-register.

"Pitch your tent with other families from the YMCA and spend an evening getting to know new people," Zahn said. "Also, join us for a 'polar bear' swim Saturday morning."

Another family outdoor activity the YMCA encourages is biking, and the newly established El Paso Bicycle Co-op at the Bowling Family Branch includes volunteer staff helping teach families about repairing and maintaining a bicycle.

Summer sports camps for youth are plentiful each season, but families shouldn't overlook the chance to enjoy sports and sports events without a large fee.

El Paso Diablos baseball has always been a top summer family destination, and this season Diablos fans will have an opportunity to enjoy a game on the house, with their annual Kid's Day game at Cohen Stadium.

This year's Kids Day game is Wednesday, Aug. 22 with the Diablos vs. the Wichita Wingnuts, and includes a wealth of activities for both kids and adults. In addition to families, the day is also for area daycares, summer camps and organizations wanting to embark on a field trip to see their home team play.

Diablos' Public Relations Director Lizette Espinosa said the summer event has games, giveaways, interactive booths, jumping balloons and free parking for both individual vehicles and busses.

"This is one of our few morning games with children yelling, cheering, eating, and playing for hours in the stands while the Diablos play the Wichita Wingnuts on the field," Espinosa said. "It's all open seating, so plan to get here early for the best seats in the house."

Las Cruces Road Trip

Just a short ways up the road from El Paso, the city museums of Las Cruces have more options for just the cost of a tank of gas.

The Museum of Natural History at the Mesilla Valley Mall is one of four museums, along with the Las Cruces Museum of Art, Branigan Cultural Center and the Las Cruces Railroad Museum (all at or near the Downtown Mall) in the city's museum system. All four offer free admission. Museum of Natural History Education Curator Kimberly Hanson said the museum offers free events and exhibits year-round focusing on such diverse subjects as the area's natural geology to math skills.

On June 16, is the hour-long "EXPLORE: Math" discussion suitable for all ages, intending to show how the subject of math is anything but boring.

"Dr. (Vincent) Gutschick of the Las Cruces Academy will bring math to life with hands on demonstrations of probability, randomness and technology," she said. "This program is fun and engaging and suitable for all ages."

This summer's featured exhibit "The Rift & the River: Geology of Southern New Mexico" running through July 22 concentrates on familiar surroundings.

"The exhibition discusses the history of this region — for the past 36 million years — and the relationship between the Rio Grande Rift and Rio Grande River," Hanson said.

Both the Museum of Fine Art and Branigan Cultural Center often take part in the monthly Downtown Ramble, a free arts walk held the first Friday evening of each month in which many Downtown area galleries and museums, including the nearby Rio Grande Theatre gallery, coordinate their exhibit reception times to allow visitors to wander from place to place enjoying art, and often live entertainment and refreshments. Other free family events include monthly storytimes, workshops, mini concerts and the Railroad Museum's monthly Family Game Day that gives families a chance to play and learn about early 20th century games.

The museum system's fine arts facility, Las Cruces Museum of Art, also has weekly Family Art Adventures at 10 a.m. Saturdays at no cost. With each project taking less than an hour to complete, families can stroll through weekly Las Cruces Farmers' Market just outside the museum afterwards.

For more information on the City of Las Cruces' museum system, visit museums.las-cruces.org. The NM Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum, 4100 Dripping Springs, Las Cruces, charges a nominal admission but also offers a wide variety of family activities.