

Tampa Bay Times

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Krewe blossoms from founding five to mega parade

By Sheila Mullane Estrada, Times Correspondent

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TAMPA — It started with five men wanting to honor Tampa and Ybor City's Latin heritage and culture, particularly during the Gasparilla Festival.

Danny Martinez, 84, one of the men, met at the Columbia Restaurant with then-owner César Gonzmart.

"The Gasparilla Krewe was more high society and wouldn't let us in, so we wanted to form our own Krewe," Martinez recalls. "César had visited Spain at the invitation of Generalissimo Franco and learned about the Knights of Sant'Yago who protected pilgrims on their way to the shrine of Santiago."

Each of the five recruited another five members and the group held its first coronation on the third floor of the Centro Asturiano de Tampa building on Nebraska, where it still meets today.

From that relatively simple start, the Krewe of the Knights of Sant'Yago have morphed into a 250-member group with a signature event: the Illuminated Knight Parade along Ybor City's historic Seventh Avenue.

Marching bands, celebrities, lots of glitz, gaudy floats, and, of course, the El Rey (King) and La Reina (Queen) again will highlight the parade on Saturday (Feb. 11). The two-hour parade, which started two years after the Krewe formed in 1974, stands as one of the highlights of the Gasparilla Pirate Festival.

This year's Knight Parade is expected to attract thousands of watchers from around the Tampa Bay area, but members say it won't match the bawdy nature of past marches.

"Our parade is very family friendly and not as wild as it was decades ago," says Ray Favata, chairman of the 2017 parade, stressing that alcohol is not allowed on the parade route streets. "We have not had an arrest during the parade for the past seven years."

The parade, dubbed the largest and most beautiful night parade in the South by Suncoast Magazine, will begin at 7



p.m. at the corner of Seventh Avenue and Nuccio Parkway and continue along Seventh Avenue to end at 23rd Street at about 9 p.m.

Favata urges parade-goers to arrive early to sample the many ethnic foods that will be offered by restaurants and vendors along the parade route.

The 125 parade "units" include high school marching bands, floats carrying this year's Sant'Yago king and queen (Joseph A. Madiedo and Ansley Grace Hall), members of other Gasparilla krewes, and celebrities such as *Divorce Court* Judge Lynn Toler and Steve Wilkos, host of *The Steve Wilkos Show*.

The parade is co-sponsored this year by MOR-TV and will feature the Tampa Bay Buccaneers as grand marshals. The Glazer Family Foundation will also participate as special guests of the Buccaneers.

It's a grand production for a group that started with just five founders. The Knights now cap its membership at 250 but remains open to Tampa Bay professional men of any ethnic background. New members enter as squires and must be sponsored by two existing members and pay annual dues.

And in keeping, or maybe even surpassing the tradition of the original Knights, each member is responsible for the cost of their own Knight Parade costumes, which can reach \$5,000 or more.

"The costumes have a lot of bling, a lot of rhinestones," said last year's king, Jamie Urso, now the 43rd Baron of the organization. "I told the designer that I wanted a king's costume that would make Liberace blush."

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KNIGHT PARADE

The annual Krewe of Sant' Yago Illuminated Knight Parade starts at Seventh Avenue and Nuccio Parkway at 7 p.m., and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Glazer Family Foundation will serve as grand marshals. It's free but you can get \$25 bleacher seats at kreweofsant-yago.com.

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