Elvis will be in the house

For the Desert Valley Times

Elvis Rocks Mesquite enters its second year June 23 through 26 at the CasaBlanca with 76 year-old Claude Nielson at the CasaBlanca Resort complete with his wig, Elvis suit and the rest.

Nielson — a retired chiropractor — moved to Mesquite three years ago. He took the event by storm in 2010 finishing fourth among more than 50 entries.

"He was absolutely incredible," said event organizer Sue Arko of Phoenix. "No one knew what to expect from him, but he turned out to be amazing. While the expectations were unknown, he was a delight and rocked everyone's world."

Using a walker borrowed from a local care facility in Mesquite, Nielson limped onto the stage, faked a fall and launched a performance that drew a pair of standing ovations in the jam-packed CasaBlanca Showroom.

Born in Nebraska and raised in Salt Lake City, Nielson sang in karaoke events before deciding at the last minute to enter last year's Elvis Rocks Mesquite.

"I just happened to read about it in the newspaper," Nielson said recently. "It was close to the start of the show and I kind of wondered if I could get in. I went down to the CasaBlanca and talked to some of the clerks who put me in touch with the promoter. I had done some Elvis songs in the past and thought it might be kind of fun to enter."

The 76-year-old Nielson, participating in serious competition, was the only entrant over the age of 30. He also had the least expensive clothing — worth about $300, far less than the threads worn by his competitors that cost as much as $3,000.

"It was huge," Nielson laughed. "I started out singing in the '50s category with 'Love Me Tender' before singing 'My Way.'

"I was the first 'virgin' in the competition."

While he just missed out on the prize money, Nielson received the ultimate compliment when his competitors named him as the most inspirational performer of Elvis Rocks Mesquite.

"I was only one slot away from the money," Nielson explained. "I'm told the money has been increased this year and the purse will pay down a little further. It's going to be very good this year. They added another category for the amateurs and that's probably the one I should have entered last year."

This year's event promises to be even better considering the success of the 2010 program.

Emcee, and Elvis Tribute Artist, Rich Vickers said "Elvis Rocks Mesquite was one of the highlights of 2010 for our family. Some of the best buys in the Elvis Entertainment world competed - guys I had heard of but never really had a chance to meet. It was such a joy watching all of these guys performs. From the seasoned performers to the brand new rookies, it was just a great show with great camaraderie.

"The entire event was incredible; not only the Elvis shows/contest but the after show parties and all the events surrounding the entire weekend. It was a total blast to be part of such a world-class event at the CasaBlanca. As soon as we found out the dates for this year's event we red-lettered it on our calendar."

This year's Elvis Rocks Mesquite will again include competition in '50s, '60s and '70s categories. Tickets begin at $11 and may be purchased at *www.elvisrocksmesquite.com.*

To enter the event call Sue Arko at 480-926-5547.