

## THE SPIRIT BEHIND FAMILY DAY

Elissa Papirno. Hartford Courant. Hartford, Conn.: Aug 26, 2001

Charles Christie is unlikely to be found bowling alone.

The computer specialist, free-lance disc jockey and spirit behind Family Day in Hartford's Keney Park defies political scientist Robert Putnam's theory that Americans have lost the spirit of voluntarism. (They bowl alone instead of in leagues, and don't engage in civic activities.)

For 16 years, Christie, 42, of Bloomfield has run the annual celebration with his family and team of volunteers to encourage residents of the surrounding area to visit the park, Hartford's largest, and enjoy music, food and family activities there.

Last week, a reader complained that the article about this year's Family Day, which ran on the local news pages in a few editions Monday, focused on the lack of racial diversity among the people attending the event.

The reader said she has attended Family Day since she was a child and was upset that a gathering that was supposed to bring together people in a troubled neighborhood at a difficult time was portrayed as lacking because most of its participants were African American.

Christie, the quintessential can-do organizer and volunteer, expressed his own disappointment when I called to check a few facts. "My team works really hard to deliver a product. We reached a goal," he said.

"The event is billed as a nonalcoholic, African American event," he noted. Of course, he would like to see people of many backgrounds participate. But the primary purpose of Family Day, which started under the auspices of the Friends of Keney Park, is to encourage families in the area to use and enjoy the park. Most of the people who live in the vicinity -- including the neighborhood where 8-year-old Takira Gaston was shot on July 4 -- are African American.

Christie himself grew up on Enfield Street a block from Keney Park, attended Northwest Catholic High School, Greater Hartford Community College and now works as a computer specialist at the Travelers. As a child, he played in the park almost every day. "It's an awesome park. It should be used," he said.

Working to bring music to the park as a DJ in the 1980s, Christie was invited to organize the family festival and then became president of the Friends of Keney Park. When the Friends, under a different president, ended its sponsorship of the event, he founded another organization, Family Day Enterprises Inc., so the festival could continue. "It's a serious commitment. We live in Bloomfield. We give this gift back to Hartford."

Obtaining financial support and coordinating the musicians, vendors and organizational participants in the festival takes a year. Christie also serves as event manager for the annual Greater Hartford Jazz Festival.

This year, Christie's 12-year-old son proposed that computers be rebuilt at the festival and given away so that other children could have computers to do their homework and go on the Internet. The names of six recipients were drawn at the festival.

"Those kids are happy, and they'll see us again," said Christie, who believes it's more important to give time than money to others. "We came up in the era when you were taught to give."

Christie is among many residents of Hartford and its suburbs who choose to offer their time to others. They may not always receive as much notice in all editions of the newspaper as those who break the law, run for political office or lead protest marches. Articles about them tend to appear on the Hartford Neighborhoods pages or, in the case of suburban volunteers, in the local town news sections. Or their good works may surface, anonymously, in notices of forthcoming community events.

People who receive suburban editions of The Courant should be exposed to these Hartford residents and former Hartford residents who have chosen to stay engaged in the city and its neighborhoods.

This year's Family Day was especially poignant because of the recent drug-related violence in the area and the shooting of Takira Gaston. Many people who grew up but no longer live in the neighborhood also go to Family Day. It's an opportunity to see old friends and, as Christie said, be thankful "that we're all still alive."