

UNITY, PRIDE AND PONY RIDES KENEY PARK FAMILY DAY PRODUCES SUCCESS FROM STRUGGLE

JOHNNY MASON, Courant Staff Writer. Hartford Courant. Hartford, Conn.: Aug 21, 2000

Even though he had only had four vendors registered a week before the opening of the 15th annual Keney Park Family Day Festival, was short on cash and volunteers and suffered a generator breakdown during a concert Sunday, Charles Christie, the event's head cheerleader, knew it would all work out.

And did it ever.

"This gives the kids an opportunity to do something positive," said Christie, president of Family Day Enterprises Inc., which produced this year's event. "This brings the community together."

The two-day festival was billed as promoting family unity and pride in north Hartford and attracted an estimated 25,000 people to enjoy children's activities, recreational games, food, music and arts and crafts.

The alcohol-free event featured about 35 vendors who also showcased jewelry, African clothes and carvings, and sheep, goats and ponies from the Circle K Farm in East Hampton.

Christie and friends had the backing of a gorgeous summer day, which allowed many city children to reach through metal cages and feed the farm animals, some for the first time in their lives.

"Mommy, he don't want none," said Jamine Jones, 4, of Hartford, attempting to feed a 6-month-old pigmy goat named Princess. "He must not like it."

The booths, arranged in a circle with the bandstand at the far end of the park, offered health and human services exhibits, including areas where people could register to vote.

"You cannot change the system if you're not registered to vote," said community activist Naomi McKoy, who helped collect voter applications with the Upper Albany Neighborhood Collaborative on Sunday.

A performer dressed in a Mardi Gras outfit stood on stilts as a group of kids yelled for him to shape balloons into their favorite animal.

"How do you get into you car with those things?" Shaneice Palmer, 12, of Bloomfield asked stilt walker Rick Adam of Buckfield, Maine.

"I use a stretch limo," replied Adam.

To host the event this summer, Christie and several volunteers raised about \$50,000, with more than \$35,000 coming from Fleet Bank.

The event could have used an additional \$70,000, which would have enabled the group to advertise in the newspaper and on television and to attract some bigger-name entertainment groups.

The event, which in past years has had acts such as the legendary Delfonics, jazz artist Alfonzo Blackwell and singer Latoya G, featured Blue Magic, a classic Philadelphia R&B band, along with several reggae, hip hop, jazz and gospel groups.

Christie said it was a struggle to get major corporations to contribute money to support the event. He believes the reason companies and individuals choose not to support the event is because it's a predominately African American event located in north Hartford, a predominately black community.

And while the city absorbed labor costs for employees of the public works, parks and recreation, and licenses and inspections departments to help with the festival, organizers receive no money from the city to run the event. The city also picks up the police overtime bill.

But Christie said that each year volunteers find a way to pull off what he considers to be a successful event that he believes has become an important venue for many African American families.

"Keney Park takes a bad rap. We have the capabilities of working together to make this thing happen," Christie said. "It's still our goal to make this a New England-wide event."