

KENEY PARK FESTIVAL A FAMILY AFFAIR

RICK GREEN, Courant Staff Writer. Hartford Courant. Hartford, Conn.: Aug 20, 1995

Pouring homemade lemonade out of a cool ceramic crockpot, Judy Butler-James had just the right idea Saturday at the 10th Annual Keney Park Family Day Festival in Hartford.

After all, she was surrounded by members of the James Family.

The Jameses were cooking, serving, drinking, sitting and relaxing. This year, family members were selling food and drinks from one of the dozens of booths that lined the great meadow at the North End park. Making their contribution a family effort fit right in.

"The thing is, you know how some family members can't work together?" said Butler-James, who is assistant pastor at Bethel A.M.E. Church in Bloomfield. "Well, we work together."

Families, friends and food -- that probably best describes this year's festival, which was graced by a glorious blue sky day. In a park given to the city by a rich grocer, organizers said the family day is a reminder of what counts.

"First, I hope people take away from this that family is important, and second, I hope they come and utilize the park," said Jeff Stewart, a member of the Friends of Keney Park, the group that organized the day.

Men played horseshoes while, in the distance, a cricket game unfolded. Police officers rode on horseback. Children played tag. Old folks licked ice cream cones, and children slurped snow cones. There was fierce and sweaty competition on the basketball court and on the tennis courts, where drill teams stamped and strutted their stuff.

And this being a community picnic that felt like a country fair, it was hard not to bump into someone fishing for votes. Candidates for the board of education, the city council and mayor were all looking for signatures for their petitions to get on the ballot. Still, the number of tasty food booths appeared to outnumber the politicians.

"I got sweet potato pie, spare ribs, chicken, hash and hot dogs," said Johnnie Gore, who was tending to a mountain of meat with her special sauce while

her friend Mae Caesar explained that the two women were "soul food specialists."

Gore and Caesar had a lot of company. At grills all over the meadow near the park entrance at Greenfield and Woodland streets there was some good cooking going on. There was also some old-time fun -- like in the horseshoe pit where horseshoes flew through the air, some landing in clouds of dust, others making that distinctive clink when they hooked the iron stake.

"It is a change to see all my old friends. It's nice," said Bill Gilmore, who watched the horseshoes tournament, which had two dozen participants. "Most of the guys here, I played ball with in school."

Nearby, the competition was just as fierce among the drill teams, where the girls from Stowe Village were defending their title with some high-stepping, synchronized moves.

"My feet are hurting, stomping so hard," said Latoya Ledbetter, 14, after her team, Bran Nu, finished their routine. Their gold and black outfits were soaked with sweat.

Surveying the crowd of hundreds of colorfully dressed people, listening to the jazz and the drums, and smelling the grilling meat, Friends of Keney Park President Charles Christie said the day was a chance for "the flavor of Hartford to show itself."

"It is a big family reunion," said Christie. "People know that on the third weekend in August, this is the event."

The Keney Park Family Day festivities will continue today starting at 10 a.m. Festivalgoers should enter through the park gate at Greenfield and Woodland streets. There is no charge.