

Metro

Fellowship, Food Fill Air At Black Family Reunion

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After 20 years, the Black Family Reunion has become, well, like family, a place you can keep coming back to even if you've been away for a while, like Mark McCoy.

It had been four or five years since the 44-year-old teacher from Silver Spring visited the annual celebration on the Mall, and the world has changed a lot.

But as he watched his son Derek, 8, and other children sitting under a tent, learning how to sketch Mickey Mouse, McCoy said the festival was the same fun, familiar event that he remembers from years ago and that he expects for years to come.

"It just goes to show you that if you do something right, and they have done this right for many years, people will support it," McCoy said.

Started in 1986 by the National Council of Negro Women, the event was intended as an affirmation of family at a time when black families in particular seemed in peril -- beset by deepening poverty as the rise of crack cocaine filled morgues with murder victims and maternity wards with drug-addicted newborns.

The idea, said Dorothy I. Height, the council chairwoman and a civil rights activist, was to show America that the black family and the values that underlie it were still alive.

"We thought if we don't celebrate our own values, we can't expect other people to do it," Height said as the final preparations were being made for the weekend.

Spread over a stretch of the Mall from Seventh to 14th streets NW, the celebration, which continues today, draws large crowds each year for a buffet of entertainment, education and inspiration.

Music was all around, from a jazz band playing for a small audience under a white tent to a rapper sounding off on stage a few blocks away.

It was a day to be at ease, but also a day to be enlightened.

Under another tent, a panel of health experts was urging parents to keep soda and other junk food out of the house.

Down the way, a squad of school-age lacrosse players was warming up, eager to showcase a sport that has long been played in mostly white prep schools but has been slow to catch on among blacks and Hispanics, particularly in poor communities.

"They see there's another sport out there," said Adora Curry, executive director of the Washington Inner City Lacrosse Foundation. "This is how we get our exposure."

For many of the families who took in the reunion in its first few hours yesterday, the event was just a chance to be together, outside on a comfortable day and among the friendly, amid the aromas of such favorite foods as jerk chicken, Cajun fried fish and sweet potato fries.

"It doesn't cost to come to the National Mall, and this event is huge," said Carolyn Roberts, 35, of Northeast Washington, who was with her daughters, Timiah, 12, and Tcarol, 11, and her fiancé, Dimitrius Benbow. "You just come, be yourself and mix and mingle."

The openness of the event, the fact that it can be enjoyed by just about everyone, is one of its hallmarks, Height said. "I'm proud of the fact that we bring people of all economic and social classes together and that there's a camaraderie," Height said.

While many blacks have climbed out of poverty over the past two decades, many others have not, and in the past few years, some of the gains have eroded, said Roderick Harrison, a demographer at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. The number of homicides has fallen but remains high in inner cities. Other problems, some little known two decades ago, have emerged as new concerns in black communities. HIV infections among black women, for example, are increasing rapidly, Harrison said.

Height, 93, a magnetic presence, said that for some people, the Black Family Reunion can be the first step toward bridging the chasm between those who have made stable, comfortable lives for themselves and those who are still striving for one.

"It's like having a weekend," she said, "when everybody is somebody and we all know it, and there's no effort to make anybody greater than anybody else."

It is that sense of equity that appealed so much to McCoy, drawing him back after a few years away.

Many events cost money, and that leaves a lot of people out, he said. At the reunion, "you don't have to have money to come and enjoy yourself."

And, of course, he knew that the reunion was going to be just what he had come to expect, he said.

"This is one thing that I can count on year in, year out."