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Outreach: Building Community Connections

Lauren Evoy Davis

Festivals often serve more than one purpose. Some festival planners have a passion for the arts, or specialty foods, and some are created to both share educational goals while also helping the local community. For example, the Lake Eden Arts Festival (LEAF) www.lakeedenartsfestival.org in Black Mountain, N.C., has been sharing art education, music, camping and outdoor family fun for eleven years and contributing to its community through outreach programs.

The goal of the LEAF festival is to "connect cultures and create community through music and arts," according to a recent news release about the festival that takes place in May 2-14 and also in October 20-22, 2006.

Both local musicians and artists and those from around the world share their talents and teach festival-goers of all ages how to do yoga, participate in healing art classes and make folk crafts.

One of the ways the event creates community between festivals is through its LEAF Schools and Street Program which sends artists into the North Carolina community and to work with kids in mentoring programs at community centers. "Some of those kids will come to the LEAF festival with the performers and are part of their performance," said Jennifer Pickering, Founder and Executive Director of the Lake Eden Arts Festival.

"It's really cool. The kids get a mentoring program within their school or community center as well as getting the festival experience and also being a performer and interacting with their mentor," she said.

This year, the LEAF festival also pays homage to Louisiana culture through Zydeco dancing, New Orleans BRASS, Mardi Gras Indians, and Klezmer music and dance. The event will also feature native American Martha Redbone, Maria Muldaur and her Blusiana Band as well as folk groups Crooked Still and Larry Keel & Natural Bridge.

To help the hurricane victims in the Gulf Coast, Pickering and her staff have been helping musicians get back to what they do best, share their music with the world. Since the hurricane hit, Pickering and her staff have been collecting instruments for both professional players and for the students returning to the decimated schools in New Orleans. "We took five truckloads over New Years," she said, and Pickering is leaving shortly to take another truckload to New Orleans.

"We're going to keep taking instruments down as long as there is need," she said, which is likely, a long time.

So, for your next festival, consider new ways to not only entertain and educate folks, but to help those in your community, both local and far away. It brings more meaning to creating a fun and philanthropic event that extends past the weekend that the festival takes place and serves to raise and maintain awareness about those who need help most.