

Juneteenth Jubilee celebrates Black excellence, history and community in Walla Walla

Kate Smith Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

Jun 17, 2023



The Real Deal, with Erika and Gary Winston, leads off the entertainment at the 3rd annual Juneteenth celebration at Washington Park in Walla Walla on Saturday, June 17.

Greg Lehman, Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

Tawn Smith-McQueen said Juneteenth's meaning is different for everyone. "Juneteenth is the understanding of the Black idea. Juneteenth is never, ever, thinking you're second to anybody or anything. Juneteenth is standing up, walking down the street with your head held high," he said from the stage at Washington Park, 700 W. Cherry St. in Walla Walla, on Saturday, June 17.

Juneteenth National Independence Day commemorates the day in 1865 when federal troops arrived in Galveston, Texas, with the order to free those who were enslaved.

Early celebrations of Juneteenth date to 1866 and started as community and church gatherings in Texas, then spread throughout the South.

The occasion is now celebrated in communities throughout the U.S., including in Walla Walla, where for the third year the community gathered to celebrate Black excellence and history with soul food from Annebell's Bar-b-que and ASANI EATS and music performed by an array of local and regional artists. Smith-McQueen is founder of Annebell's Blackberry Sauce.

The Juneteenth committee, a diverse group assembled by COCOA (Color Our Community on Awareness) put together the free event, which also included local businesses, educators and activities for all ages.

A silent raffle raised funds for Joyful Grants supporting BIPOC students.

“We ask them what brings you joy, and if that is art, if that is music, if that is dance, we help support those dreams,” said committee member Nadine Stecklein.

Prizes included baking supplies, wine, soap and other handmade goods.

The Walla Walla Public Library and Walla Walla County Rural Library District Bookmobile had books on hand for visitors, who could also peruse the offerings of vendors including natural care products from NurturedBiNature's Cassidie Robbins and healing practices of Karene Hibbs with the Shanara Sacred Energy Healing Center. The Washington Advocates of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Planned Parenthood, Legal Counsel for Youth and Children and the Walla Walla Diversity Coalition also had resources available.



Tawn Smith-McQueen, founder of Annebell's Blackberry Sauce, talks about what the holiday means to him at the 3rd annual Juneteenth celebration.

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Norma Hernandez and Tom Scribner, mayors of College Place and Walla Walla, read proclamations recognizing the history of the Juneteenth holiday and the contributions of the Black community locally.

Colette Marie smells an essential oil held by Cassidie Robbins at her NurturedBiNature booth at the 3rd annual Juneteenth celebration at Washington Park.
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“The African American community in the city of College Place has made significant contributions to the history and the quality of life within our city, which has gone unrecognized for far too long,” Hernandez read from the proclamation.

Smith-McQueen’s vision of the holiday is one of community. He said it’s not easy being a Black person in America, but it takes coming together as a community to change things.

“Thank you for being here,” he said at the start of the Jubilee. “This is Juneteenth to me.”

Honoring history

While celebrating the excellence and jubilation of the Black community, Saturday’s event also offered education about Black history in Walla Walla and Southeastern Washington.

Posters and maps told the history of segregation in the region and shared the stories of Buffalo Soldiers of Fort Walla Walla, the Bogle family and the first squadron of the African American Women’s Auxiliary Corps.

Research by Cheris Current, director of the Donald Blake Center at Walla Walla University, documented the residential segregation found in at least four neighborhoods in Walla Walla: Park View, Millbrooke Park, Alderbrook Park and Mountain View Homes.

Property deeds for homes in these neighborhoods were found to have racial covenant clauses preventing Black families from buying land or homes, essentially creating white-only neighborhoods.

While the clauses are no longer legal, Current said they are still seen in the property records. She said homeowners can take steps to invalidate or remove those covenants.

In another history lesson, the Walla Walla Valley Farm to School Program was passing out bean and peanut seedlings in honor of George Washington Carver and his contributions to Black farms in the South and growing practices. Garden education manager Dani Dolphin said Carver was considered too sick to work on the farm as a child but spent his time out in the garden, learning about plants and cultivation.

As an adult, he went on to give advice to Black farmers, recommending they plant legumes like beans or peanuts to reintroduce nitrogen and improve the quality of the soil. The practice, called cover cropping, is still used widely.

Dolphin was encouraging people to take bean and peanut seedlings started by WWVF2S and plant them in a place they see regularly to remind them of their own growth and potential.

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Dani Dolphin talks about George Washington Carver at the Walla Walla Valley Farm to School booth, which was giving away live peanut and kidney bean plants.

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