

# Thriving International Festival is chance to embrace diversity

The long-running International Festival is an opportunity for the community to embrace diversity and learn more about Mankato's changing demographics.

By Robb Murray, Free Press staff writer [published in The Free Press, Mankato, MN, 4/20/2006]

Photo by Pat Christman



Mankato's annual International Festival takes place Sunday at Mankato East High School. Over the years, many people have worked to make it a success, including (from left) Mirabelle Paul, Ann Carlberg, John Just and Gladys Olson. Not pictured are former chairpeople Dale and Donna Hanke.

MANKATO — He was there when the Mankato International Festival was an infant, a fledgling endeavor just starting its long journey into the heart of Mankato's diversity.

That was more than 30 years ago. And John Just says that while some elements about the festival have seen profound change, others have not.

"I think back to the old downtown mall and to its present site at East High School, and it's the same. There's a sameness there," said Just, who once upon a time was the festival's main coordinator. "It has a purpose. It has clarity."

By now the festival has been put on more than 30 times at a handful of venues. But it began in the community. And as it enters its third year at the Mankato East High School venue, that's where it thrives today.

The engine, of course, is Minnesota State University's International Student Office. Students from around the world come to MSU to study. One weekend each spring that pool of talent is tapped to teach the community a little bit about India, Nepal, Mexico, Pakistan or any other country humanly represented in Mankato.

Each year there is dancing, singing and merchandise on display from around the world. And, of course, there is food.

International Festival represents the one time each year when it's possible to feast on lefse one minute, egg rolls the next and sambusa the next. The food alone is reason enough to go. But for people such as Just or second-year volunteer Mirabelle Paul, International Festival is more than just good eatin'.

Paul says International Festival is a time to break down walls and build bridges.

"When you live in suburbia, you don't have an opportunity to meet your neighbor," she said, "particularly if your neighbor doesn't look like you."

While Mankato may be not a bustling metropolis of cultural diversity, the city's complexion is changing. In Mankato Area Public Schools, non-whites make up 13 percent of all students. And the latest U.S. Census Bureau statistics show Mankato's non-white population has grown to about 8 percent. Also, the influx of refugees and immigrants from African countries has brought more diversity to elementary schools, exposing children early to different cultures.

And that's a good thing, Just says. Hitting youth with the message early on that diversity should be embraced as an opportunity to learn — not a source of baseless, irrational fear — can only benefit the entire community now and years from now.

Just, who used to be a geography teacher, says he used to wish he'd had immigrants in his class to better teach the geography of countries far away from the United States.

His family also for years had served as a host family for international students, an experience he says will benefit his children and grandchildren for life.

"I have 10 grandchildren, most of them were in the third grade and lower when we were deep into the international experience here," he said. "Our family had a number of Turkey, United Arab Emirates students — they were mixing in with them from Day 1. I know it's had lasting impact on them. My grandchildren look at people of color as just that: people of color."

International Festival, then, is just one more way to spread the message of acceptance.

For Paul, who came to Minnesota several years ago when her husband took a job with the Mankato Clinic's St. Peter location, the International Festival always has been an impressive display of international culture. At last year's festival, she said the parking was convenient, it was easy to get around inside, no long lines for food and a great area for kids.

Beyond that, the mere fact Mankato has an international festival says a lot about its commitment to diversity.

"It opens us up, forces us to look at other perspectives. There are other perspectives on issues like education or politics," she said. "Also, people who are kind of interested in other cultures but don't have time, this is their platform. There you have it, pay a couple of bucks and talk to someone from the Philippines."

If You Go:

What: International Festival

When: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday

Where: Mankato East High School

Cost: Admission and parking are free