



CulturFest

Press Release – for IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Contact – Michael Jensen, 507-456-1445 (mjensen@trimgraphics.com)

Title: *CulturFest Committee plans their last festival*

CulturFest began in 1999 with a group of individuals that wanted to make a difference in our ever changing community. At that time as well as today – the community of Owatonna continues to change, for example our public school system serves over 20 languages today. CulturFest is a committee of the Cultural Diversity Network (CDN), a 501c3 – in the beginning CDN was created to help new immigrants to our community build relationships and find their way in our community.

There was a core group of people that worked on CulturFest over the years – most of them have been with the organization since its inception or within the first couple of years. Many things have changed about CulturFest over the years, but the core purpose has not. The mission of CulturFest is to promote understanding and respect, keeping Steele County peaceful, trusting, and respectful in a time of rapid social change and an increasingly diverse population.

CulturFest was first held on the campus of West Hills, the second festival and for a number of years there after CulturFest was located at Washington School grounds. The festival outgrew Washington and relocated to Wilson School grounds where it is still today. In the beginning a fee was charged to attend the festival, however thanks to the generosity of this community and Legacy Funds from the State of Minnesota the festival was able to become a free festival open to all.

The core of the festival has stayed the same over the years, including live entertainment of music and dance from professional performing artists. Food and children's activities have also been important to the festival experience. Over the years all of these areas have expanded to include the World Passport Program sponsored by many colleges and universities in the region; hands-on cultural artist demonstration; sports demonstrations highlighting sports from around the world that may not be as familiar; as well as animals from around the world including – chickens, Norwegian Fjord horses, llamas and more. Each year the festival has expanded or grown in what is available to the attendees. Some unique features of past and current festivals have included activities like Geography Bee, Sculpt-A-Culture and the Amazing CultuRace.

The festival has also been home to some nationally recognized attendees. *Celtic Spring Band* a family of Irish performers that were finalists on the hit NBC Television show

called *America's Got Talent* graced our stage. The festival also hosted a couple of the participants from the hit CBS show called the *Amazing Race*, when Luke and Margie a mother-son team from that show shared their experience with the community. Their attendance was extra special in that Luke is deaf and was able to engage with students attending the Minnesota School for the Deaf in Faribault, MN.

2010 was the only year that the festival wasn't held in its traditional form. Rain or shine the festival has gone on, however in 2010 the major flood led the festival to a little different approach. There were a couple of food vendors that were going to take a significant financial loss if the festival didn't happen, so CulturFest purchased their food and worked with First Baptist Church to prepare the food and deliver it to the Owatonna residents that were struggling with the flood. "This was probably one of my most memorable experiences from being a part of the festival – to watch people of all ages, ethnicities, backgrounds working together in an intimate space to prepare unique ethnic dishes to deliver to the community was incredible. This was also topped off by the excitement of the recipients of the food – many of whom would have never tried these meals" said Michael Jensen, Marketing Director for the festival.

"Twenty years is a long time to be a part of CulturFest and to see the impact on this community has been extremely rewarding" said Sue Schroeder, Chair of the Festival. She went on to say "I like to think that this festival has made a difference in how the citizens of Owatonna approach each other."

Over the years the committee has brought in different individuals to be a part of the planning group, but have not been successful in finding people willing to take on the leadership roles that are required to pull off a festival like this. "The core seven to ten people that have been leading this festival over the years have become more than coworkers, they have become family" said Rod Baker, Chair of Grounds for the festival. "There is such trust in this committee – each one of us has our area of responsibility and we can fully trust that the job will get done" said Mandy Young, Treasurer and Chair of Opening Ceremonies. Kelly deBruin, Chair of the Passport Program went on to say "this festival has become a family thing, not only for those of us on the committee, but for our children as well."

Everything in life has a season, and for the core leadership team of CulturFest their lives are changing, with new chapters in front of them. With these changes in mind and with the future of the festival in mind, the committee has made the extremely difficult decision to organize their last "CulturFest" this year. The 2018 CulturFest on September 22nd will be this committee's last CulturFest. This decision did not come lightly as they saw impact that the festival has had on the community but they realized their limitations and challenges to expand the core committee. The community of Owatonna has changed in many ways since the inception of the festival. "The timing seemed right as we would be holding the 20th festival this year, it would provide an excellent opportunity to go out

with a huge celebration” said Sue Schroeder, who went on to say “we are hopeful that other groups will fill the void that CulturFest will leave in this community.”

CulturFest 2018 will happen – and the committee is doing all that they can to ensure that it will be one of the most memorable experiences. The full status of the Cultural Diversity Network (501c3) and Around the World Food and Brewfest isn’t known at this time, but the committee is looking for ways to keep this organization alive and serving this community. CulturFest is an outdoor multi-cultural festival that happens the 4th Saturday in September every year, this year it will be on September 22nd at the Wilson School grounds. You can visit www.culturfest.net for more information.