

New Bedford's 44th Annual Whaling City Festival



by Joe
Silvia

The 44th Whaling City Festival is coming to the Veteran's Memorial Buttonwood Park in New Bedford's west end from July 13-15th, bringing the ever familiar musical acts, festival foods, local vendors, merchant booths, amusement rides and more that people have come to love. The new Whaling City Festival president Allen Richard plans on shaking things up by adding many new elements to the usual ones people love and come to expect. If you thought it was the same old festival, think again.

Mr. Richard, who took the reins as president this year, is focusing on sending a signal that the Whaling City Festival has changed and is continuing to change for the better. His eye is on improving every facet of the festival with each coming year. Festival hours are still from 9 am to 8 pm Friday through Sunday. Mr. Richard is hoping to extend those hours in the future to allow the estimated 125,000 people that pass through the festival each year to continue to enjoy themselves after 8 pm.

Richard who has been involved with the festival since 1988, has grown through the ranks because of his love and passion for the city's historic festival. "I started getting involved in 1988 picking up trash as a volunteer and now as President...I'm still picking up trash," he told us over coffee



at Cafe Arpeggio.

Richard is ambitious, creative, and has a blue collar work ethic when it comes to managing and organizing the festival. However, he is struggling to overcome some negativity that has cropped up in the past. An incident in 2006 in which a brawl broke out and 23 arrests were made, and a problem with a small minority of vendors hawking counterfeit items has presented a few problems for the festival organizers. "Identifying counterfeits is hard. If you have some experience and expertise with them it's easier to spot. But I'm learning." Richard stated. "I have no tolerance for it. I'm keeping a sharp eye out and doing everything in my power to crack down on it."

As for the brawl in 2006 Richard said, "the police chief at the time said that the brawl is responsible for the 8pm curfew, and that by closing before nightfall the festival will be safer. But the brawl happened between 6 pm and 7 pm. At the Businessmen's Festival a few years ago [2008] a person was shot, and they are open until 10 pm. The Portuguese Feast has a bunch of people placed into protective custody each and every year, and their curfew is 11:45 pm."

"The truth is that the Whaling City Festival is a safe, fun family focused event and we've proven that year after year. Before the brawl in 2006 there were no issues and 6 years later we've had no incidences. We're not asking for special treatment, just for a fair shake."

Being restricted to an 8 pm curfew has harmed revenue and scared away some potential vendors who don't want to lose the

extra sales which would make it worth the trip. Out-of-state vendors have stated that with gas prices the way they are, they don't want to make the drive when they are losing 2 hours of potential revenue each night. These 2 extra hours can make the difference in a vendor's profit or loss.

Richard feels that this restriction is partially responsible for vendor participation dropping from 250 tables in 2006, to 140 last year. Sponsorships have dropped as well, resulting in what was an annual \$5,000 donated to citywide scholarships to now nothing at all. The drop in revenue has also restricted the entertainment, amusements, and acts that Richard has been able to recruit preventing him from putting on the highest quality festival possible. For example, the very popular laser light show, bigger name musical acts, and some children's activities.

In spite of these obstacles Richard is optimistic and plans on proving to the city each and every year by having an incidence free and successful event.

Being able to remain open until 10 pm as other festivals throughout the city are allowed to do will encourage vendors to participate. This in turn will drive up sponsorship and allow Richard to give back to the city with scholarships as well as continue to add new amusements.



"Some of new ideas I'm working on and hoping to recruit are the Soccer Collies-dogs who play soccer against a team of kids, Arm Wrestling, a BMX stunt show, an Illusionist, and the addition of a Foodfest that highlights New Bedford. We're thinking of highlighting the Portuguese community, food, and culture by having a Cacoila Fest and having a challenge

attached to it. We would charge around \$5 and donate some or all of the proceeds to the ailing K-9 program for the New Bedford Police. It would be a way of saying thanks for all the work, time and energy the NBPD has given us year after year. But to add these things and keep making the festival better, I need vendors and sponsors. To get them I need a later time slot."

Of course, as always the expected crowd favorites will be present like Finelli Amusements, the Dance Extravaganza, Car and Motorcycle Show, Face Painting, Top Pro Wrestling, Live Music, and vendors selling crafts and goods. Popular food items like the Blooming Onion, Turkey Legs, Amaral's Linguica, Greek Delight, Gyros, and Shish Kebab will of course whet everyone's appetite.

Each year the Whaling City Festival has a crew of 20-30 volunteers from the ages of 12-90 who help with information, traffic, directions, setting up, breaking down, picking up trash, manning the gates, drink service, and more. It's a ton of fun, and at the end of the festivities Richard treats all of the volunteers to a great meal at his expense.

As with every year FREE shuttle service will run from New Bedford High School to the festival grounds.

In an attempt to help promote the festival, presidency, recruit vendors, sponsors, and volunteers Richard runs a website and an accompanying Facebook Page. The website will be updated in the coming weeks with the schedule, itinerary, and info.

If you are a potential vendor, or sponsor and interested in participating in this year's Whaling City Festival, you can apply here:
<http://www.whalingcityfestival.net/applications.html>

If you are interested in becoming a volunteer or are a musical act looking to participate in this year's festival you can

contact Allen Richard at: ARichard@WhalingCityFestival.net.