

Celebrating hope

Fort Dodge residents come together for Juneteenth



-Messenger photo by Britt Kudla

Sherry Washington, president of the Pleasant Valley Awareness Committee, holds part of the ribbon from the ribbon cutting for the new basketball courts at H.C. Meriwether Park Saturday during Juneteenth in Pleasant Valley.

Fort Dodge residents gathered at Meriwether Park in Pleasant Valley on Saturday to celebrate the Juneteenth holiday.

The event featured a car show, local vendors and a basketball tournament on the newly renovated courts.

Murphy Washington, a member of the Pleasant Valley Awareness Committee, described the Juneteenth gathering as a unifying event for the community.

“Juneteenth means emancipation, freedom and unity,” Washington said. “For us to truly have the voice to be unified and talk about things that bring us together is what Juneteenth is for me.”

Washington’s sister, Sherry Washington, said that the holiday gave the community the opportunity to come together and strengthen.



-Messenger photo by Britt Kudla

Brandon Presswood, of Real Deal BBQ in Fort Dodge, cooks up ribs during the Juneteenth celebration on Saturday at H.C. Meriwether Park in Pleasant Valley.

“Juneteenth means unity with our friends and our families,” Sherry Washington said. “It continues to build those stairs on a great foundation here in Fort Dodge.

“When we continue to build those stairs, I just know we get stronger and stronger and I think that’s what unity needs to be,” she added.

The Pleasant Valley Awareness Committee has hosted two events at Meriwether Park before Saturday, with one being a Mother's Day celebration and the other in the fall.

The previous events featured a free throw contest, but Murphy Washington said that the newly renovated basketball courts provided the committee an opportunity to host a men's basketball tournament.

The tournament paid homage to HOOPLA, an event held at Meriwether Park in the past where pickup basketball games were held.

"Right now, we want to put it in the atmosphere that we want to get back to the HOOPLA stage, but we have to start somewhere," Murphy Washington said. "We have two to four teams that say they are coming to play."

Murphy Washington also noted that people officiating the Athletics for Education and Success (AFES) tournament on Saturday came to the park to officiate the tournament.

The Juneteenth celebration featured a variety of local vendors, including Steve Clayton, who previously owned Clayton's Ribs and Chicken before retiring.

Clayton cooked catfish and fried potatoes underneath a canopy, saying that Saturday was his first ever Juneteenth event.

"This is a first-time event that I've taken part in," Clayton said. "I used to have Clayton's Ribs and Chicken, but I retired from that. Sherry asked and I said I'd help. Plus, it's for the church, so anything for the Lord."

"I'm excited to be a part of this," Clayton added. "I mean, anything I can do to help Sherry and Murphy and when there's something, I'll take part."

Clayton has lived in Fort Dodge since the 1960s along with Charlene Washington, the mother of Sherry and Murphy Washington.

Similarly to her children, Charlene Washington has put in the effort to bring positive changes to the community.

In the 1970s, she orchestrated a movement to bring Black teachers to Fort Dodge after the elementary school in Pleasant Valley closed.

“I got a committee together, we signed petitions and I went to the superintendents of schools at the time and I told them we needed Black teachers,” Charlene Washington said. “We had a school in the neighborhood and they closed their school and activities.”

“They didn’t learn anything and didn’t get in the kitchen,” she added. “The superintendent who worked with us gathered five Black teachers in 1977 and they started teaching Black history.”

Charlene Washington said that Black History and Juneteenth are important because of a lesson taught to her by her parents.

“My parents used to tell me to always celebrate the hope of your life, but we never celebrated our own day,” she said. “I am so glad we are recognizing it now, because this has been in the making for a long time.”

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