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Sense of Place Story
JOUR 411

Bear Down Fridays

Lawson Parsons, hair spray-painted blue and red and streaking down his forehead, is so excited to be at Bear Down Fridays. He runs from booth to booth at the Jr. Cats Corner, trying out every game and playing every instrument. And then he sees them, Wilbur and Wilma Wildcat, dancing along the sidewalk behind the band. He runs over to give them a giant bear hug and tell them just how much he admires them. To him, they are his local celebrities.

“Well we always like the musical instrument zoo right?” Lindsay Parsons, Lawson’s mom said. “Right!” Lawson said.

“And obviously seeing who?” Lindsay Parsons said. “Wilbur and Wilma!” Lawson said.

Bear Down Fridays started 14 years ago, by the Marshall Foundation on the UA campus. The event was inspired by Boulder, Colorado’s Friday “Stampede,” said Jane McCollum, the foundation’s general manager.

“I was attending a downtown conference, and they were talking about marketing and how you need to be true to who you are, and since we are next to the university and the university is the center of Tucson’s universe, [Bear Down Fridays] would bridge the gap between the university, students, and the community,” she said.

The sea of alumni, families, and students wearing red and blue were already pouring onto the street of University right when the events started to kick-off at 4 p.m.

Once the sun starts to set on Main Gate Square, the Pride of Arizona marching band comes stomping down University, following the streetcar in. Kids with big grins on their faces rush to the edge of the street to get a closer look at the giant plumes and shiny instruments.

Playing loud and proud, the band performs “Bear Down Arizona,” hyping up fans lined up on the street. The UA cheer team marches down the street alongside the band, shaking their shiny red pom poms and smiling big for every fan to see.

Kids ran home from school that day to put on their UA red and blue T-shirts to come support the Wildcats, while families also sported their UA attire.

The Bear Down Friday stage was set up, playing fast-spitting rap and thunderous rock and rolls music so loud, you could hear it from down the block. Students in head-to-toe Wildcat gear, red and blue everything, some even sporting glittery face stickers of the “A,” came walking down University, sneaking into the many restaurants along the route to grab a bite to eat and drink a beer or two.

These restaurants and other businesses down University including Frog and Firkin and Gentle Ben’s offer drink and food specials for Wildcat fans. Campus Candy gives out free samples to fans walking by.

“Regardless, it’s usually big and Tucson supports [the football team]. Everyone’s offering deals, so that’s a cool reason to be out here. Starts out with students for the first Bear Down Friday, then more locals come,” McKelvey said.

Campus Candy manager, Nathan McKelvey, has been working during Bear Down Friday’s for about four years. More families have been coming to cheer on the football team at Bear Down Friday, not so many students come anymore, McKelvey said.

Bear Down Fridays have always seen a fairly large crowd, said McCollum. Only once did Bear Down Friday have only five people show up before UA was to take on Oregon, McCollum said. It rained on the event and the people who did show up to sport their Wildcat spirit, sat in the restaurants on University to escape the pour down of the rain. The band played their fight songs in Gentle Ben's, she said.

Otherwise, every Friday, Wildcat fans show their spirit and come to bear down on University.

The Jr. Cats Zone is a popular destination at Bear Down Friday, according to McCollum.

New this year, the Jr. Cats Zone is offering an instrument museum, balloon animals for young Wildcat fans, and games like cornhole, that appeal to include both adults and kids.

Organizations including the Flandrau Science Center & Planetarium, the Children's Museum Tucson and the UA cheer team will be at several Bear Down Fridays to help pump up the crowd and excite people for the football games.

Another organization that is present at all Bear Down Fridays to help excite fans about gameday is the ZonaZoo Crew. Dressed in red and happy to talk to fans of all ages, the ZonaZoo Crew can be found walking around and helping cheer on the home team with everyone.

"I wanted to know what goes into it, and how to get the game as hype and energetic as possible," ZonaZoo member Chayse Bauer said. "I'm looking forward to meeting people and actually getting to be part of the campus environment a little bit more...spread the energy for gameday."

Bear Down Friday wraps up at the main stage where performers dance and a DJ spins beats. Families left with tired kids, who were sugared out from the candy and sweets from the free giveaways. Face paint and colorful spray-painted hair were now lightly smudged from the heat.

Bear Down Fridays take place on Friday evenings from 4-7 p.m. during the months of September through November before every UA home game. The next Bear Down Friday is Oct. 11. The full list of Bear Down Fridays can be found [here](#).