

The Hour

Norwalk International Cultural Exchange debut festival set for July 9 at Oyster Shell Park

By ROBERT KOCH Hour Staff Writer

NORWALK — Over the years, many cultural festivals celebrating Norwalk's diverse ethnic heritage have fallen to the wayside for lack of interest or money.

One resident hopes to reverse that trend and bring back the traditions in one fell swoop through the Norwalk International Cultural Exchange (NICE) Festival Series that will debut at Oyster Shell Park on July 9.



“We were talking about doing smaller festivals that would highlight different regional, international areas in the world, so Mediterranean or Scandinavian, African, Caribbean, and so forth and so on,” NICE Inc. Executive Director Janet Evelyn told Common Council members Tuesday evening. Instead “we decided it would be nice to launch a full-fledged, large multicultural festival where we could bring all of our groups together.”

Council members approved unanimously Evelyn's request to use Oyster Shell Park on Saturday, July 9, from noon to 9 p.m., for “The NICE Festival.” Evelyn anticipates up to 4,000 people attending. Admission will be free.

“NICE will be a fun-filled celebration for people of all ages and will feature live entertainment, food, activities and vendors reflecting that diversity,” said Evelyn, who was born in Jamaica.

NICE, Inc., she said, is in the process of formation as a non-profit organization whose goal is to promote and increase awareness of the diversity of peoples from around the world through arts and cultures.

As such, the one-day festival will celebrate different world cultures through music, food and the performing arts. That means world cuisines; Flamenco, Asian, African and other dancing; rock, reggae, rhythm and blues, Latin and jazz music; health and environmental exhibits; and “family friendly attractions with fun interactive games and exhibits,” according to Evelyn.

As part of the world cuisines portion, she is hopeful that Norwalk's restaurateurs will take part.

“One of the wonderful things about Norwalk is the cadre of international restaurants. We certainly want their participation so we can showcase that aspect,” she said.

The NICE Festival is a collaboration between NICE Inc., the Norwalk Department of Recreation and Parks and the Norwalk Arts Commission.

“It's a nice, multicultural event. I thought it was a fabulous idea,” said Michael A. Moccia, Norwalk's director of recreation and parks. “We would help out in any way we could because it brings the community together. I think this could be a real replacement event for some of the events that are gone.”

Moccia counted The Round Hill Highland Scottish Games, Association, Puerto Rican Day, and Haitian and Columbian festivals as among the cultural festivals that have been discontinued over the years in Norwalk.

He envisions the NICE Festival filling part of that void and Oyster Shell Park, which has undergone major capital improvements over the last several years, becoming a regular venue for The NICE Festival and other events.

“That's the perfect spot, using the pathways up there, because you've got built-in parking in South Norwalk,” Moccia said. And “we're looking at Oyster Shell Park because of the completion of a lot of (housing) in that area right now and the mall going in. It's a nice, attractive place for a special event.”

More information about “The Nice Festival” can be found at <http://www.norwalknice.com/>.