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African-American community celebrates Buffalo's 39th annual Juneteenth Festival



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Members of the Crusaders Drill Team perform on Genesee Street in the annual parade to kick off the Juneteenth Festival in Buffalo on Saturday. Charles Lewis/Buffalo News

By Lisa Khoury (mailto:lkhoury@buffnews.com) | News Staff Reporter

on June 14, 2014 - 9:34 PM

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Nine-year-old Jimari Smith knows why Buffalo's Juneteenth Festival is important to the African-American community.

"It's this woman – that history woman," he started. "I don't remember her name. Oh – Harriet Tubman!"

The festival, which kicked off its 39th annual two-day celebration yesterday at Martin Luther King Park, is the oldest-known celebration commemorating the end of slavery in the United States.

More than 30,000 people walked around the 56-acre park on Buffalo's East Side throughout the weekend, visiting small tents where almost 150 vendors sold traditional and modern African merchandise. It is the third-largest Juneteenth celebration in the nation.

One New York City vendor sold African drums. A New Orleans food stand offered shrimp po' boys. Nadine Dubenion, a hometown vendor, sold raw black soaps and lotions made in Ghana.

Visitors lined up in front of tents, one offering fried catfish. Or, they tried on traditional African garments and listened to the recitations of poets on black oppression.

Above all, Juneteenth nurtured strong feelings of unity among members of Buffalo's African-American community.

"Primarily, it kind of brings the community of today together," said Melissa Hogues, who has been coming to Buffalo's Juneteenth Festival with her family since she was a kid. "Because most of us aren't from Africa, we kind of just enjoy being together

and being unified for the weekend and with people from the community we haven't seen in a long time."

Each year, Hogues and her sister, Mia Washington, look forward to buying African dresses and oils. Now that Hogues has three children of her own, she brings them along to Juneteenth.

There are cultural lessons everywhere. When Hogues purchased oil from a vendor, daughter Destiny Hogues noticed shea butter in an African shea nut.

"We use shea butter. We know it comes from Africa, but we actually saw it in the nut," Hogues said. "So she was like, 'What was that?' I was like, 'That's the shea butter – that's what you use, it comes from the nut.' It's kind of like educational at the same time."

Marcus Brown, president of Buffalo's Juneteenth, said the festival's educational component is vital to the celebration. "You've got generations of people that don't know what their history is, so it's important for us to try to bring that to the forefront," said Brown, president of the festival since it debuted 39 years ago. "It's important for us, especially with the kids coming up now, to know where they came from and to know all the great accomplishments that have been made by African Americans."

Today is the final day of the festival. Activities include a praise and worship services from 10