

NORTH BRUNSWICK NBM MAGAZINE

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Winter 2009-10

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North Brunswick
Favorites Contest

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Crossing the
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Un Successo Enorme

In case you missed it, the inaugural Cape Fear Italian Festival (CFIF) was a smash hit. Drawing close to 6,000 people — including United States Supreme Court Associate Justice Samuel Alito, Jr. and his wife — to the Cross Creek Commons shopping center in Leland on September 26 and 27, the festival included 58 craft vendors, seven food vendors and a host of musical acts. Despite its success, Mike Forte, president of the CFIF Committee, promises that next year will be better.

“We’ll have more great Italian food, more great Italian wine, more great Italian fun,” Mike says.

How can a festival top itself after rave reviews from visitors, vendors and sponsors?

“We’ve got to call in some favors from the weatherman upstairs,” says Paul Paolicelli, CFIF sponsorship director. “We had close to 1,500 people here Saturday when the rain started and they packed into Buggy’s Cigars, under awnings and into storefronts to try to wait it out.”

“Unfortunately, the rain was too much,” adds Frank Bullara, owner of Buggy’s Cigars and vice-president of CFIF. “We ended up having to call off the majority of the festival on Saturday.”

Calling off the festival worried the organizers. Keeping promises made to



STORY BY BILLY JASON FRYE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEITH KETCHUM



sponsors, vendors and visitors looked impossible, and their investments in time and money seemed dashed. Fortunately, the weather cleared and Sunday was bright, beautiful and crowded.

“We had almost six thousand visitors, most of them on Sunday,” says Frank, letting a note of pride slip in. “What if the weather held on Saturday? Right now we’d be talking about ten thousand people.”

“Twelve thousand,” interrupts Mike.

“Imagine that, ten to twelve thousand people at the Cape Fear Italian Festival, at a first-time festival. In Leland,” says Frank.

With most of the major festivals in the region held on Wilmington’s riverfront, growing towns like Leland face an interesting challenge

as they develop their identities — to have a festival or not. Festivals are expensive, but a good one draws thousands of visitors, refills the coffers and holds the promise of more people next year. Frank, Mike and some of the Buggy’s Cigars regulars felt it was time for Leland to have a festival of its own.

“We wanted something on this side of the bridge, something to help Leland develop its personality a bit,” Mike says.

“It was perfect timing,” Frank says. “We had the idea of doing a festival and then Paul comes in one day and mentions

Top left: The Cross Creek Shopping Center thrived with about 6,000 visitors at Sunday’s festivities; bottom left: Festival organizers Mike Forte and Frank Bullara; middle right: The festival raised \$3,000 for Brunswick Community College.

that he, Steve Rondinaro and Kevin Wuzzardo had been talking about starting an Italian festival. The light bulb went off and I told Paul that we should do it right here.”

Shortly after their impromptu meeting, the group formed the CFIF committee and began meeting at Buggy’s Cigars. There they drank espresso, smoked cigars and batted around ideas for the festival. Five months later, the gates opened and the Cape Fear Italian Festival was more than an idea.

While the weather did put a damper on the opening day, Sunday more than made up for it. Proceeds from the gate went to cover the festival costs and toward a scholarship for Brunswick Community College.

“We’re giving the Brunswick Community College Scholarship Foundation close to \$3,000 as a result of people coming to Leland and having a good time,” Frank says. “You can’t imagine how happy we are to be able to do two things that help our community and have a great time doing them both.”

As a first-time festival, the CFIF had a difficult time securing sponsors, but after the positive press and fantastic word-of-mouth from attendees, the committee already reports calls and e-mails inquiring about sponsorships for next year. The visit from U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice Samuel Alito and his wife didn’t hurt the festival’s reputation either.

“Paul’s responsible for getting Justice Alito here,” Mike says, and it’s no joke. The Alitos read Paul’s memoir, *Dances With Luigi* and *Under the Southern Sun*, and used it as a guidebook on a trip to Italy. While in Durham at a conference, they decided to contact Paul.

“They invited me to dinner in Durham and I told them the only way I’d come was if they would come to the Italian Festival,” Paul says. “I guess we hit it off at dinner because they showed up Sunday.”

The Alitos enjoyed themselves, eating, mingling and listening to the music like everyone else, and stopped by Buggy’s Cigars for a quick photo and a couple of Frank’s finest. Justice Alito was impressed with the festival and was pleased with how well it reflected the Italian culture to everyone in attendance, saying “I think it’s important for everybody in this country to know their heritage because it’s all part of the story of the United States.”

Like any big event, the Cape Fear Italian Festival couldn’t have happened without a lot of help, as Mike and Frank are quick to point out.

“We had 50 or so volunteers, 35 of them from Buggy’s,” Frank says. “They worked their tails off for lunch and a free T-shirt. Danno from Max Power was a huge help. He hooked us up, literally, with all the electrical work for the festival.”

“I don’t know if we could have pulled it off without all of our volunteers,” Mike adds. “I hope they’re around next year.”

As for next year, the usual promises of more, better and bigger apply, but Frank and company vow not to lose the fun, family-friendly atmosphere they had this year.

“We want you to feel welcome, festive and Italian when you come through the gates,” Frank says. “Our challenge will be making it bigger without losing the intimacy we had this year, but we’ve got a good team and I’m not worried about that in the least.” ■

For more information on the 2010 Cape Fear Italian Festival, check out www.capefearitalianfestival.com or follow them on Facebook (search Cape Fear Italian Festival) or on Twitter (CFItalianFest).



Right: The organizers of the Cape Fear Italian Festival, left to right: Steve Rondinaro, Mike Forte, Frank Bullara, Paul Paolicelli and Kevin Wuzzardo.

