

A SPIRIT OF RENEWAL CARVER RANCHES' MECCA FESTIVAL RALLIES WORSHIPERS TO BECOME INVOLVED AND HELP THEIR COMMUNITY

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

There was a lot of movement in the Carver Ranches Park recently.

Babies swayed gently as their mother's danced to the music of the Second Canaan Baptist Church choir.

A sudden, warm, tropical breeze moved through the park, cooling the nearly 700 people gathered under a huge yellow and white striped tent.

And, a spirit of renewal and friendship swept through those who sang and prayed and responded to the motivating words of visiting pastors.

The event was the 5th annual Mecca Festival sponsored by the Carver Ranches Home Owners Association and several local churches. "We chose the name Mecca because it reflects a place of rest and refreshment, an oasis," explained Eric Jones, pastor of the 6,000 member Koinonia Worship Center in Carver Ranches.

"The festival is a chance come together and to give back to the community," explained Felicia Brunson who serves on the Mecca Board of Directors and is the Vice President of the Carver Ranches Home Owner's Association.

"We started the week with a family festival including a concert and an arts and crafts show, and continued with a basketball tournament," Brunson said. "Then, we finished off with a Black and Gold Gala," she said.

At the center of the week's events was a series of praise and worship services held each night under the huge tent. A lineup of local choirs and pastors each took a segment of time to sing and offer a word of renewal and encouragement.

"Many of us have our backs against the wall," exhorted the Rev. Joe Johnson of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Hallandale. "We face crisis after crisis, whether it be falling stocks and retirement accounts or foolish personal decisions," he told the crowd.

"But, I know who I belong to, and I know who I am," he proclaimed. "We know who holds the worries of the world in his hand and we don't need to panic."

Encouraging the exuberant congregation to become involved in solving the community's problems, Johnson said, "Let's get up and go and not wait on someone else. God often gets his work done through strange people. Don't count yourself out."

"God can use you when your back is against the wall," he concluded.

For many people who attended each night, the festival was more than just its individual events. "It's about getting in touch with our roots and renewing our community," explained Sebrina Frazier who served on the planning committee. "I know of people who plan their vacation during Mecca so they can come back and visit. In fact, I know of one family who came all the way from Virginia to be here."

"It's about coming back to somewhere that you can always feel loved," Frazier said. "You can see that this week as you see people embracing each other and loving each other."

The festival also helped raise money for community services and needs according to Marvin Price who is president of the Carver Ranches Home Owners Association. "We provide four scholarships a year to local children going on to college," he said. "We also help groups like the senior citizen's center and the boys and girls club."

Willy Wiggins of Miramar liked the outreach nature of the festival. "The men's group at our church provides counseling and help to people in the area," he said. Wiggins is part of the Men of Destiny group at the Koinonia Worship Center that provided security and helped with logistics for the festival. "We like to connect people with resources and educate them on political issues," he said.

The Carver Ranches area was originally founded by people from the Bahamas and Georgia, Frazier said. Now the residents come from many areas throughout the United States and the Caribbean.

"Today, it's a middle class community and not what you would call a blighted or low-income area," Price said. "It has really changed in the past ten years. You see more pride and young people building their own homes."

Price said that the community would like to be annexed by a neighboring city such as Pembroke Pines in order to provide more services to its residents.

Area residents hope that through their efforts they can achieve their goals. They were encouraged to do that at the Mecca Festival. "God chose the foolish to confound the wise and the weak to confound the mighty," Rev. Jeffery Mack, pastor of Second Canaan Missionary Baptist Church in Miami challenged the crowd. "God encourages the best in you."

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