

BEACHFEST UNITES CHURCHES EVENT A SUCCESS WITH VOLUNTEERS

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

The recent Beach Fest Christian festival held on Fort Lauderdale's beach offered more to local residents and churches than just an extended party, Christian rock concert and competitive skating.

Local churches had plenty to opportunities to participate in the event that was sponsored by Argentinean evangelist Luis Palau.

"It was an awesome opportunity to live out what I believe," explained 15 year-old Jessica Watson of Hollywood. "You don't get many opportunities to show someone how to know Jesus."

Watson was one of an estimated 5,500 local residents who were trained as counselors to work with those who attended the festival March 22 and 23.

"Counseling training sessions were offered starting in January and February," reported Rev. Jason Smith of Miramar who serves as the Youth Pastor at Cooper City Church of God.

Following various musical presentations, Christian testimonies by well-known athletes, and evangelistic sermons by Palau, counselors were scattered through the massive crowds on the beach "looking for those who raised their hands in response to invitations for commitment or who indicated a need to seek further counseling," explained Terry Scalzitti, Single Adult Minister at First Baptist Church of Fort Lauderdale.

"Each counselor will be able to follow-up with two or three people," Scalzitti said. Between 400 and 500 people were trained as counselors at First Baptist.

"Counselors wore colored visors with English, Spanish, Portuguese or Creole printed on the front to indicate the language that they were prepared to use in counseling," explained Laurie Tone of Westchester Community Church in Miami who attended the festival on Saturday.

While counseling was one of the more significant local contributions to the event, churches participated in many other ways.

"We had 2,500 people involved as volunteers," said Mark Davis, Assistant Pastor for Church Administration at Fort Lauderdale's Calvary Chapel. "Some were involved in prayer groups, others in setting up or cleaning up or security, some leading programs for children, others fund raising and some providing entertainment."

Some volunteers, such as Mario Padrino of Plantation, volunteered by offering professional services. Padrino, who owns three Cuban restaurants in Hallandale, Boca

Raton and Plantation, provided up to 2,000 meals each day of the festival to feed volunteers, speakers and artists and hundreds of guests from other cities who were in Fort Lauderdale to see how the festival was organized and plan for a similar event in their own community.

“I wanted to participate to spread the gospel,” explained Padrino who is a member of Flamingo Road Baptist Church in Cooper City. “It was a privilege to be a part of such a big and historic event.”

Much local effort went into turning out the over 300,000 people who attended the two-day event.

“We helped to get the word out through announcements in church and in the church bulletin,” Calvary Chapel’s Davis said. “We also had people put out banners and the yard signs that were everywhere in the community.” Davis said that over 25,000 of the small yard signs for Beach Fest were spread all over Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach Counties.

Even with all of the publicity, Davis said that the event was primarily promoted by church members inviting friends to attend. “Many times it’s hard to get non-Christian friends to come to church. But they will attend a beach party with you,” he explained.

Palau’s organization, which has sponsored similar events in Seattle, Syracuse and Myrtle Beach, will only come to a community if invited by local churches.

“The invitation was a local initiative,” said Eddie Bevill, the pastor of Parkridge Baptist Church in Coral Springs. “It has been a rallying point for our church and has had an impact to be part of something so big.”

Beach Fest has also been good for church unity in Broward County Calvary Chapel’s Davis said. “Many times, church leaders are too busy to be involved with outside activities,” Davis explained. “But church members will volunteer and serve. This event has united the Christian community in south Florida as we have worked side by side in a cooperative effort.”

Miramar’s Jason Smith said that 1,100 local churches took part in Beach Fest one way or another.

That local involvement will continue beyond the close of Beach Fest. “We have been trained to minister to people who have made inquires,” said Kent Mezger who is on the staff of Community Christian Church in Plantation. “We will be following up and inviting them to church.”

“Each person who makes a commitment or an inquiry filled out a slip of paper,” Smith said. “We will try to get people into a church with a friend,” he said, explaining that each person was asked who invited them or if they have any connection with a local church.

Over 5,000 inquiry forms were turned in for processing during the festival according to Craig Chastain, Director of Communications for the Palau event. “We don’t want to put too much emphasis on that number, however,” Chastain said. “When you stand on the platform after a presentation and see the number of hands raised from people wanting to make a decision or make an inquiry, you know that it’s in the thousands.”

For Watson, who is a member of Sheridan Hills Baptist Church in Hollywood, three of those slips of paper were very personal. “I was kind of nervous at first,” she said. “But I eventually saw three women in their young twenties who were raising their hands. I went up to talk with them and found out that they wanted to recommit their lives to Jesus.”

“It was awesome to think that it’s not common for a 15-year-old-girl to witness like that. But, they seemed to welcome me and I knew that it was what I wanted to do.”

Watson said that the experience of volunteering at Beach Fest will “make me more bold in the future, now that I know how to make (the Gospel) simple.”

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