

The Valdosta Daily Times

Fun at the Folk Fair

By Malynda Fulton

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— VALDOSTA — Community members ventured through more than 40 countries in the world Saturday without ever leaving the Valdosta city limits during the annual Azalea International Folk Fair and Dance Competition. Fellowship, activity and smiles could be seen throughout the James H. Rainwater Conference Center as racial, ethnic and cultural diversity was celebrated. By the day's end, the folk fair and dance was deemed Georgia's official international festival in a House proclamation presented by State Rep. Amy Carter.

The fair featured countries from Europe, Africa, Asia, Central America, South America and the Caribbean. Among Asian countries was Korea, displayed by Korean Directors David and Jae Branch. Visitors were taught to fan dance and play Korean traditional musical instruments such as the janggo, buk, jing and kkwaenggwari. The Korean representatives also performed a traditional wedding.

The Motherland was brought to life when entering into Africa, which featured collectibles and art that represented most of Africa's 53 countries and island groups. An East African Art Collection from Valdosta State University archives held 92 items collected in Ethiopia during the 1960s and 1970s. Representatives also provided educational facts on different countries, which included Nigeria, represented by Temple Ogundu. African Director Mireille Nde, who has worked with the folk fair for two years, expressed her support and appreciation for the annual celebration and its efforts to educate citizens. "Africa is mostly depicted as a jungle, a country filled with impoverished people," said Nde, originally from Cameroon. "Through the fair, we are able to expose Africa as the beautiful continent that it is. Of course, there are places in Africa that suffer from poverty and disease, but most of Africa is filled with beautiful cities and wonderful attractions."

The dance included 24 teams and showcased 18 countries. Taiwan representatives performed the Picking Tea dance and were followed by German and Scottish dancers. Jesus Garcia, his girlfriend Angelica Dominguez and her two brothers, Juan and Luis, were among those who filled the exhibition hall to cheer for their favorite

performances. Garcia mentioned that he valued the impact the folk fair has on the community.

"The fair has no main focus and features each country equally," Garcia said. "Valdosta has become such a melting pot and it's just good to see that people actually care to learn about other cultures."

VSU Vice President of Academic Affairs Dr. Louis Leavy could also be found admiring the performances. "This festival certainly represents the county, city and university's expansion in global perspectives," Leavy said. "We are proud to be leaders in the effort to promote and celebrate diversity." Attractions included arts and crafts, photo shoots in international costumes and a tattoo booth. For Florence Pinkston, the granddaughter of Tyson and Mary Sue McLane, the puzzles, costumes and dances were the favorites of her, her brother John Russell and her sister, Quincy. Though they are originally from Virginia and visiting their grandparents, the children expressed interest in returning to the fair next year.

Food from various cultures and countries was also prepared by country representatives. First-time comers Kierra Fountain and Maranda Jones indulged in various types of foods along with their home school classmates Sierra Woods, Josh Colbert and Jeremy Stone. After tasting cuisine that ranged from Filipino to Cuban, the five agreed that they enjoyed the food from Thailand the best.

The folk fair and dance evolved from the vision of Director Serena Huang, who began a celebration of the Chinese New Year in Valdosta in 2000. The event grew into a celebration of Asian culture and has developed into an all-inclusive showcase of the world's cultures.

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Photos



Haley Girsch, 3, dances with South Georgia Families With Children From China during the opening ceremonies Saturday for the Azalea International Folk Fair and Dance Competition.



Teresa Herron prepares a plate of South Korean food Saturday at the Azalea International Folk Fair and Dance Competition.



Russ Goddard and his son Zachary look over displays from countries around the world Saturday at the Azalea International Folk Fair and Dance Competition.