

FAMILIES IN THE PARK History

Presented by Mike Schend



Thursdays In August

6 -9 pm Jackson Park - 13th & May St. Hood River, OR

Before I forget, here is a brief history of Families in the Park. I don't believe this has ever been documented, so hang on to this history. - Mike

I started it in 1982 and I titled it Families in the Park because I wanted families to attend together. I had done a similar program in Minnesota before coming to Hood River and it was successful there. Jackson Park just seemed like a natural spot with the sloped ground for seating.

The first two years we had entertainers perform in the grass where ever we could find enough flat space. In 1984, the Lions Club donated funds to pour the concrete pad on the west side of the park. The intent originally was to have a surface for serving food and holding picnic tables. We actually used that surface for performers a couple of times, but it didn't work well because people were sitting side ways in the grass. In 1984, it was obvious by the attendance that we needed a stage in the park.

In 1985, I started a fundraising campaign to generate funds to build a permanent stage. I started by getting on the agenda at the city council to get permission to build it in the park. I already had designed the stage and had sketches for them to look at. Once approved by the council, I started going to organizations asking for help. It took almost a year to generate \$5,600. It wasn't near enough, because even back in 1985 it was estimated to cost over \$20,000. I had to be creative to figure out how to make it happen with \$5,600. It just so happened that in the spring of 1985, the high school construction class could not sell the home they built. In order to build a house each year they needed to sell the previously built house. I approached John Brennan who was the teacher. He said he would love to do it so his students would have a project. The volunteer labor from the students was not enough yet to make it happen, so I had to try and get a contractor involved as well, and figure out how to get the concrete cheaper. The concrete alone at that time was over \$10,000. Hood River Sand and Gravel said they would donate 50% of the cost of the concrete and donate the big pumper truck to get the concrete into the park. I also had to get an electrician to donate time. John Nigl (Suze Nigl's) husband said yes and we were on our way. PPL also donated the electrical hookup. I met with the city engineer at the park numerous times to stake out the best location and set dates to begin construction.

We started construction in the fall of 1985 and had to take a break for the winter. It started up again in the spring of 1986 and was finished before the 1986 series began. I wish I could remember how many yards of gravel and concrete it took, but it was in the hundreds. The concrete and gravel cost about \$4,800 and the electrical conduit, panel, and outlets took the rest. Charlie Schuepbach, who was the concrete contractor estimated that it would have cost \$25,000 to build it at that time, and we pulled it off with just \$5,600. Charlie died from ALS about 15 years ago. 1986 is when the attendance really took off.

In the early 1990's the art department at the high school under the direction of Steve Labadie asked if I was interested in having his students design decorative panels for the walls of the stage. He designed what is still on the stage today. They were foam filled panels covered with a layer of fiberglass in 3D to make the walls look like the rock basalt of the Gorge. They built the panels at the high school all year and then did the installation in May. They looked so beautiful when they were new. They had all of the colors of actual rock and Native American Pictographs were painted throughout. Unfortunately, kids found that they could break through the fiberglass layer and pull out the foam interior. Eventually, it looked so bad, I had to paint the walls all one color and I was constantly repairing holes in the walls. I filled many of the large holes with concrete, but it was too much each year to keep up with the vandalism. It was easier to just paint the holes instead of filling them and I gave up trying to patch. The mural of the back side was done by one of our mural painting summer camps with Janet Essley through Community Education.

In 1987, I was still using speakers from the high school music department and had to haul those big monsters back and forth from high school each week. We had no lights, so we always had to end the program when it got dark. In 1988, I started asking for donations for lights. I generated enough to buy haligen spot lights on tripod stands. They worked Ok, but almost blinded the performers on stage. I believe it was in 1990, that I decided to hire a sound and light tech. The first few years in the 90's was a guy from White Salmon and I can't remember his name. I'm guessing it was around 1994 when Ken Jacobs was starting his sound company and he has been the guy ever since.

Sponsors became part of the program in the late 1980's. I recruited many lead sponsors that lasted a year or two. United Telephone became the lead sponsor in the early 1990's and even though their name has changed at least four times, they are still there. The only problem was that each time they changed their name, we had to make a new banner.

There were hundreds of entertainers that performed over the 27 years that I ran Families in the Park. In those 27 years, we only had two rain outs. One night had to be cancelled completely, but the second one still went on as planned. We knew early in the day that it was going to be wet, so we scheduled it for the Bowe Theatre at the high school. Sandwich boards were placed in the park telling people where it was moved and put it on the radio. We actually filled the auditorium that night and had to turn people away.

Now you know the whole story of Families in the Park.

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