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A Proud City Rising Where The Water Falls

Milling About

MILLING ABOUT:

By KRISTEN MUSZYNSKI/Journal Tribune

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BIDDEFORD— Crowds of people filled part of the North Dam Mill on Friday evening, enjoying food, music and displays of the area's rich history and its thriving cultural scene. "Milling About," an event created by the Biddeford/Saco Cultural Planning Committee, featured art, food and music along with historical displays and drew an estimated 400-700 people from 4 to 7 p.m.

Andrea Strassner, director of the Saco Museum, was among those who helped to welcome people to the North Dam Mill, handing out small maps and artist information.

"I think it's safe to say there's an audience and an interest in arts and culture," said Strassner.

Bob Dodge, economic development director for the city of Biddeford, attended Milling About with his daughter and was one of many who was impressed by the turnout.

"This speaks volumes about how people feel about these mills," said Dodge. "They really view them as diamonds in the rough."

Seaglass Performing Arts of Kennebunk held a booth and passed out flyers for an upcoming event, "Opera for Lovers." Board members Richard and Elsa van Bergen manned the booth and said that they learned of Milling About through Doug Sanford, the developer of the North Dam Mill.

"This is what we need," said Elsa van Bergen of the strong turnout.

Local restaurants provided hors d'ouvres for the event, all of which had been eaten before 5 p.m., said organizer David Versel. Que Huong, Thai Siam, Slices Pizza, Jonesy's and the Golden Rooster were among the participating restaurants. Later in the evening, only the McArthur Hall booth was still in operation, selling beer and liquor.

Several artists had work on display in the newly finished mill hallways, from paintings and photographs to quilts and jewelry. Jessica Peck and Kim Roseberry presented "Light Play," a performance art piece in which a woman moves within a stretchy sheet in a dark room, with light shapes being cast upon her.

A unique piece created by artist Sue Murphy depicted her father's lunch box with fibers flowing out of it. Murphy is the sister of Rep. Joanne Twomey and their father, Fred Thompson, worked as a supervisor in the mills for many years. The art display also includes a photograph of Twomey's grandmother, Georgianna Cote, who, she is proud to say, was instrumental in bringing unions to the mills.

"That's why I fight so hard," said Twomey. "That's where our roots are."

A major goal of the Milling About event was to gather input from the public on the future of the cultural scene in Biddeford/Saco. Versel said that the group gathered over 100 completed surveys from visitors and heard "overwhelmingly that they wish we'd do more things like this."

Barbara and Bob Dunn, who recently moved to Saco from Connecticut, were two of the many visitors who attended on Friday night. The Dunns said they came to see what was being done with the mill building.

"We wanted to know a little more about the community," said Barbara Dunn.

The Dunns could not have chosen a better primer on the history of the twin cities. The unfinished mill walls were lined with historic photos of the area, with explanations, from Cascade Falls to local churches. La Kermesse was on hand with historical pieces and a display from the Etz Chaim synagogue even showed maps through the years that depicted the locations of Jewish-owned businesses. The maps were denoted as an excerpt of a future library exhibit on the congregation's history.

Jeff Scully, local historian and author of "It Happened Right Here," an account of Biddeford/Saco/Old Orchard Beach history, sold his book at the event. Just recently, said Scully, he found a box of about 50 of the books and figured that Milling About would be a perfect venue to sell them.

"If you catch people at a place like this, you know they're interested," he said.

Rep. Steven Beaudette (D)-Biddeford and Rep. Don Pilon (D)-Saco were in attendance, along with downtown revitalization leaders Ann Marie Mariner of Saco Spirit and Rachael Weyand, Heart of Biddeford director.

"This is a major success," said Weyand. "Everyone is excited, there's a lot of energy."