

PAID FOR BY MELALEUCA  
AUGUST 1, 2010

# The Community Page



## HAPPY 25TH ANNIVERSARY!

### To the Idaho International Dance and Music Festival

Dancers and musicians from around the world have descended on Southeastern Idaho. For the next two weeks, as in the past, hearts will be forever changed as the 25th Annual International Dance and Music Festival bursts upon the scene with parades, gala performances, instruction and vastly increased numbers of attendees.

Performers from around the globe will share their colorful costumes, exotic instruments and stirring rhythms with many who may never travel to such distant places—but will get a rare sampling of the best of the world's traditions.



The festival was born as a response to a desire by the Rexburg Chamber of Commerce to increase tourism coupled with the enthusiasm of dance directors and chaperones of the Brigham Young University-Idaho folk dance team newly returned from participation in a European dance festival tour in 1983. If it could be done there, why not here? Donna Benfield, the chamber's executive director, eagerly got on board, and began the arduous task of convincing performers and governments that this was a good idea.

The fact that the idea even got off the ground is a tribute to Benfield's tenacity as she found enthusiasm for the idea, but hard work ahead in dealing with foreign governments to be able to bring dancers to Rexburg, Idaho.

The fame of the festival, winner of the Governor's Award, has led to it being chosen as one of the top 100 events in North America by the American Bus Association. What is even more satisfying to all involved is that participating teams consistently vote this festival as the best they have ever attended.

This enthusiasm is in large part due to the unique housing arrangements for this festival, different from the pattern set in other parts of the world where performers are housed in large hostels or similar facilities. Here the nearly 300 participants are housed in groups of two or four in the homes of local families.

The goal of the festival was never solely for entertainment, rather for a cultural exchange for the residents of Rexburg with the talented and enthusiastic performers from so many different countries. While here, these young people are also exposed to the culture of America and the freedoms enjoyed here. Approximately 10 different countries visit in any given year, and have come from Africa,

Asia, Europe, South America, North America and the islands of the seas.

This year teams will represent such places as Armenia, Mongolia, Mexico, China, Thailand and Egypt.

In addition to parades and performances, dancers and musicians also conduct and participate in youth culture classes and adult dance classes, furthering the sharing of lifestyles and traditions. This melding of everyday experiences is, according to the dancers, the reason this particular festival is so popular. The bonding between performers and the people of Rexburg has become the greatest strength of the festival.

Sherry Bratsman, a former hostess, reports that, "Some teams are nervous about this [housing arrangement] at first since they have only been housed in forms or group accommodations in other festivals. They soon learn how great it is to have their 'own' family in America. The true picture of the love developed during our festival can be seen as the buses prepare to leave. Hugs, laughter, exchanges of address and faces pressed against windows with tears streaming down faces tell the real story."

This celebratory year will be enhanced in several ways with the "Fill the Hart" campaign, according to Benfield. "We want to be sure everyone in Rexburg gets an opportunity to get to the festival." In order to facilitate this desire, regular ticket prices have been

lowered from \$14 to \$10 with bleacher seats changed from \$7 to \$3. Family, student, and group rates are also provided.

Also for a first this year, performers from around this country have been auditioning on YouTube, and the visiting countries will also be bringing specialty performers with them.

The opening and closing ceremonies will also be significantly revamped, according to Gay Miller, the festival's performance chairwoman. "During the opening ceremonies we are doing a very special opening and closing number that has never been done before and hopefully it will blow people away."

Part of that event will be a flag ceremony representing flags of the 60 countries who have participated in the festival over the 25 years of its performances.

Even though the entertainment is thrilling, and the exposure to the traditions of the world fulfilling, the spirit of the festival is the crowning achievement of all that happens there.



communicate, but were struggling. Just then a young dancer from Romania stepped across the hall and asked if she could help. She spoke Spanish. So this young Romanian girl interpreted English for Bruce and Spanish for the Peruvian girl, and the deed was done. Bruce reports that "this is what the Dance Festival is all about, to promote world peace, brotherhood and international understanding."

One of the most impressive stories that has come out of the Festival involved a Polish family who had come the Festival in the first year. Two of the dancers had married and had a child. The baby was born with a defect called hemangioma, which deformed his nose. Polish doctors were

able to help the child survive, but major reconstructive surgery was still needed. When the couple's host family in Rexburg became aware of the situation, they arranged for the family to come to America. They also arranged with doctors in Rexburg and Salt Lake City to perform the needed surgery. It was very successful. The family remained in Rexburg for six months. While here they learned English, which allowed them to find good jobs upon their return to Poland.

Such experiences give the flavor of what happens at this unique festival. It is not just music and dancing, as uplifting as these talents are, but the bonding of people who ordinarily only hear about each other in derogatory fashion when fragile world relationships break down. Over the 25 years of this endeavor, hearts have been touched and lifted, friendships bonded, and these seeming small factors have the power to change the world for good.



the year before, in 2001, as he was attempting to communicate with a young woman from Peru who didn't speak English, and Bruce spoke no Spanish. They tried every way they could to

Bruce Herker, head of concessions for the celebration in 2002, told a story that took place

