BR turns out to toast town

By DEANN SMITH
 Advocate staff writer

Bonne Fête started Friday night, bringing thousands of people to the streets of downtown Baton Rouge.

Festival-goers, most carrying umbrellas in the light rain, attended concerts and bought food and trinkets from booths.

Joey George, his wife and two daughters sat on the levee, holding festival schedules over their heads and listening to the Baton Rouge Symphony.

"We're having a great time, except for the rain," George said.

On River Road, a group of about 200 people applauded street performer Mark Riggs as he juggled three flaming torches while sitting atop a 10-foot-tall unicycle.

"I don't know how to ask for money here in Baton Rouge, so I'm just gonna say, 'I could be your kid,'" Riggs told the crowd as he ended his routine and left his hat out for tips.

"He's good," Denham Springs resident Matthew Jeffers said as he turned to his daughter and opened his wallet. "Go give him a dollar."

Jeffers said the festival's first-night turnout impressed him, especially given the rain.

Like many people Friday night, Jeffers said he came primarily to see country singer Randy Travis, but his daughter wished organizers could have booked the popular group N'Sync.

Joseph Hagan, 23, a native of Algiers, said he's been to Mardi Gras many times, and likes the friendliness of Baton Rougeans.

"You don't have the fights like you do at Mardi Gras," Hagan said.

But unicyclist-juggler Riggs, who regularly performs in his native New Orleans, said he doesn't completely share Hagan's outlook.

He said the tips were much less than he can haul in from French Quarter visits.

"It looks like a really good festival with lots of people," Riggs said. "But I think they all think I'm getting paid to come here."

Even before thousands of people streamed into downtown Baton Rouge Friday night for the three-day Bonne Fête festival, Lt. Gov. Kathleen Blanco said the event should become an annual celebration.

Blanco, whose job includes promoting tourism, pronounced the celebration a success. She said the organizers have "brought in top-notch talent and other activities that are generating immense interest, and not just locally, hotels and motels are full."

But Bonne Fête is also a success because it already has created an awareness of the area's history and culture, she said Friday.

The weekend celebration, which is being held in the area around the Centrplex, is a signature event that could do well in the future, Blanco said.

"It is unifying us all. It is bringing so many people together," she said during a ceremony at Southern University. "I feel like it's going to have to become an annual event."

The weekend bash is the highlight of Bonne Fête, which will be celebrated all year to mark Baton Rouge's 300th birthday.

Southern University hosted a breakfast for local dignitaries Friday, followed by a ceremony at Scott's Bluff to kick off Bonne Fête. The Bluff is where French explorers are said to have spotted the "red stick" from which Baton Rouge got its name.

Nicole Lenoir-Bertrand, Belgium's consul-general to Louisiana, said she is thrilled to participate in Bonne Fête. She applauded Louisiana for high-
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Parking is available on the street at meters and is free after 5 p.m. and all day on weekends.

Privately owned | Capital Area parking
State leased | City Garages & parking lots

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Bonne Fête street closings

“Happy Birthday to you,” she said.

A Coast Guard helicopter passed overhead in salute and the Southern University ROTC fired cannons, joining many in the audience and setting off several car alarms.

The Southern University Marching Band played the U.S. and French national anthems and other music.

“We knew we wanted to start off with a big bang, and I believe we have accomplished that.” Mayor Tom McGough told the 100 or so people in attendance.

Several churches are sponsoring a Bonne Fête “service of praise and thanksgiving” at 7 a.m. on the levee near the Louisiana Arts and Science Center on River Road next to the U.S.S. Kidd.

The service is sponsored by First United Methodist Church, St. James Episcopal Church, St. Joseph Cathedral and First Baptist Church.

For those coming to the weekend’s Bonne Fête festivities, River Road from St. Philip Street to Florida Street is closed.

The sections of Lafayette and Convention streets and North Boulevard immediately around the old State Capitol are closed.

Festival-goers may pay to park in city-parish and state parking garages and private lots. On-street parking is available except on Florida Street from Fourth Street west to River Road.

Shuttles will run between The Mall at Cather and downtown with stops at the bus shelter outside Service Merchandise and the bus shelter at North Boulevard and Third Street. It costs $2 per round trip.

Cajun Rouge will offer a free shuttle for its customers, but its parking lots aren’t festival parking lots.