Lafayette Holi Festival, or the festival of color, participants shower each other with packets of colored powder to celebrate the coming of spring.

Skin color disappeared at Holi Festival last Saturday as magenta, blue, aqua and yellow-colored powders took its place and filled the air in Girard Park.

Friends and strangers alike embraced, smearing and throwing colors on one another, wishing each other a “Happy Holi!” People danced to Bollywood music, mimicking the movements of the Indian men and women dancing on stage.

Holi, the Hindu festival of colors, was opened to the public with free attendance for the fifth year in a row. With a turnout of around 2,500 people, members of the Acadiana Indian Association said they see growth in every year it holds the festival.

“Holi has been celebrated in Lafayette for years. It was only Indian people then,” said Raj Shetye, former president of AIA. “It’s just grown from there.”

Michelle Lakhotia, a math teacher at Judice Middle School, said Holi was held at her house for almost three decades before it was held in Girard Park.

“All of this chaos was at my house for 25 years. People would be up in the trees and on the playhouse,” Lakhotia said.

“I would be cleaning up for days afterward,” she continued, laughing.

In 2010, AIA took Holi to the park, where non-Indian citizens saw the celebration and wanted to partake in the colorful festival. At that time, it was still private, but planning to open it up to other citizens of Lafayette began.

“We figured this would be a good way to introduce something from India to Lafayette,” said Shetye. “The more experiences we share, the stronger we become.”

The event began with people dressed in white clothing buying the colored powders. Once everyone gathered at the stage, AIA began with meditation, chanting “om.”

Festival-goers danced to the music as they smiled and smeared a bit of color on one another. And then, there was the countdown for the real color throwing.

At the end of the ten seconds, attendees went wild. There were so many colors in the air, someone turned to me and shouted “I can’t see anything!”

“It’s really cool to see everybody come together, and I can throw something at someone and not feel bad about it,” said Shannon Andrus, freshman marketing major.

When the air cleared, just about everyone’s body was completely covered with paint. Most people were dancing and hugging complete strangers.

“It’s great to see children especially experiencing a culture that’s not French or
Spanish or Cajun,” said Marianna Piazza, University of Louisiana at Lafayette alumna.

Lakhotia agreed, saying that everyone is the same and everyone can have fun. “Just because we speak a different language doesn’t mean we can’t have fun together,” she said. “Indian people party just as much, if not more than people here.”

Shetye said that almost everything is run by community volunteers, including some students from Lakhotia’s classes. The students started coming to help out at Holi last year. This year, they handed out colors in exchange for tickets.

“They’re better volunteers than adults,” Lakhotia said, motioning to the young girls preparing for customers. “They’re like ‘what can I do to help?’”

Volunteers sold the 1,680 pounds of colored powder, as well as Indian food, pizza, ice cream, cookies, beer and soft drinks.

It takes AIA about a year to plan for the festival.

“This feels like a full-time job,” said Nikky Akkaraju, president of AIA. “As soon as this year’s Holi is over, we’ll begin planning for the next one.”

At last year’s Holi, Lafayette City-Parish President Joey Durel made the last Saturday of March the official Lafayette Holi Festival day. Next year’s Holi Festival will be on March 26.