Jonathan McZeal leads singers in an impromptu gospel session at the Juneteenth celebration Saturday on the grounds of the Progressive Baptist Church. Felton Johnson is at right.

History, art, music mark 'Juneteenth Celebration'

BY CHRISTOPHER BAUGHMAN
Advocate staff writer

Jonathan McZeal started slowly, and at first only five or six people gathered around. The spiritual he played on the piano sounded sad, and a woman closed her eyes as she hummed along in low, almost inaudible tones.

But soon, a few others joined in, adults and children, and then a few more.

Suddenly, McZeal switched gears. He barged into "Jesus You Brought Me All the Way," a rousing gospel number that inspired people to clap their hands.

More than 30 people crowded around the piano, all of them singing, all of them swaying and all of them clapping their hands.

Normally, McZeal is the minister of music for the Progressive Baptist Church. Saturday, he was the music maker for "A Juneteenth Celebration" held all day on the grounds of his church.

Juneteenth commemorates the day in 1865 when slaves in Texas found out they'd been freed. But organizers in Baton Rouge want to make it much more.

"We have to teach African Americans that Juneteenth is as important to us as the Fourth of July is to the country or Passover is to Jewish people or St. Patrick's Day is to Irish people," said Andrew Horton.

And according to Sylvia Barnes who handled publicity for the event, the word is getting around.

Last year's celebration drew a few hundred people, she said. Organizers planned for about 1,000 this year. But despite a legacy of Juneteenth events in other parts of the country, especially Texas, the idea is just coming to fruition here, she said.

"Juneteenth is an awareness that, regrettably, a lot of blacks have forgotten or never knew about," Barnes said.

Part of the problem is that many blacks would like to forget slavery ever existed, Horton said.

But slaves contributed to the growth of the country, he said. And blacks today should commemorate that contribution by their ancestors, no matter how painful the thought of slavery. Remembering helps prevent it from ever happening again, Horton said.

"History won't be complete if you forget slavery," Horton said. "You can't interpret history to suit yourself. Slavery was a fact of life. It's part of history and it won't go away."

Saturday's program included a seminar for people to talk about the history and the future of the black community. But a festive atmosphere pervaded the afternoon.

In a lot across the street from the church, a giant green dragon swallowed six kids who bounced on an air bag inside.

Dozens more waited in line, a couple of older children maintaining order.

Not far away, older boys engaged in an afternoon-long game of horseshoes.

Everybody feasted on chicken, potato salad and red beans in a room off the side of the church.

And people filtered in and out from under a giant green and white striped tent on a lot next to the church where McZeal led the gospel singers.

People perused books on black culture there, and studied the work of local artist Ed Barnes.

Nonnomo Aks, owner of The Stocking & Accessory Shop, sold African crowns and shirts from a table across from Barnes. People lined up for snowballs not far away.

Outside, under the shade of some trees, Alisa Armstrong displayed pants suits, dress suits and shorts suits from her A&C Boutique.

One visitor said she liked what she saw and learned.

Elaine Simms, a local hairdresser, brought customers Ruthie Jiles and Linda Higginbotham with her to the celebration.

"I told them to come with me or find another hairdresser," Simms said. "I had to find out what this was all about."

CONTINUED FROM 1B

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