



Right: Annie Francois - Organizer of The 7th Annual Straw-Bear-y Festival at Hardy Park in Brockville

Far Left: One of the many vendors that participate in the event

STRAW-BEAR-y-FESTIVAL

“Ursus Theodorus” Event at Hardy Park

By Russ Disotell

It may be the largest gathering of bears in the area, but there’s really no cause for alarm. The annual migration of furry creatures to Brockville’s Hardy Park is made up of all manner of “Ursus Theodorus”, otherwise known as the ubiquitous teddy bear. This year’s Straw-BEAR-y-Festival takes place, as usual, on July 1st and is the seventh annual festival that began life as The Teddy Bear Picnic. “People still refer to it as The Teddy Bear Picnic, which is fine, old habits are hard to break. The new name is an effort to broaden out the festival and provide even more fun”, says event organizer Annie Francois. “The beginning of July is strawberry season and they are available locally, so it seemed a natural.”

Throughout the event’s history, there has been one constant and it was the original reason Francois started the festival. “I wanted to have a free event that anyone could attend. Everything else seemed to have an admission fee and that can be hard for some families. This is an event to celebrate community and it’s free to everyone.” The first year there were about 100 people who attended and it has grown exponentially every year since.

One of the features from that first year still remains a favourite among attendees. The teddy bear hospital and teddy bear adoption were hits with the younger set from day one and continue to be the anchor events for the festival. The furry

friends can receive some tender loving care from “bear care” professionals for any sort of ailment. Adoption certificates are always popular as the “legal status” of the teddies is formalized. “This is still one of the most enjoyable parts of the festival. Lots of smiles.” Francois points out, with a smile of her own.

This being Canada’s 150th birthday, there are a number of special features planned. “We’ll have a special photo booth that has a 150th theme.” As well, everyone attending is encouraged to come in costume. “Last year, the theme was the Disney movie Frozen and it was great. This year we’re encouraging Canada Day themed costumes, superheroes, rock stars, fairies, whatever people can think up. It will all add to the atmosphere,” says Francois.

There are activities throughout the day beginning at 10 am and ending at 10 pm. While these are spread throughout the park there is a theme, so to speak. The south end of Hardy Park will be geared towards children’s activities, such as face painting, crafts, buskers, dancers, and carnival style games. This is where the teddy bear activities and photo booth will be located. The north end will house the vendor’s village. “All of the vendors are local small businesses with handcrafted, unique items. This was important to us,” says Francois. Water Street between Kincaid and Home Streets will be closed for local musicians

and a street dance from 7 pm until 10 pm, featuring Bourne to Rock.

Annie’s happy to welcome some new additions to her list of usual volunteers. Centennial Road Church will be running all of the carnival style games this year. Brockville’s Youth Volunteer Crew are also pitching in to help where needed. “Volunteers make a festival,” says Francois. “So, do sponsors” and she is grateful for all the local supporters. State Farm Insurance and Beattie Dodge have been on board since the beginning.

Another tradition is that funds are raised for a worthy cause, through a silent auction with all items donated by local businesses, groups and individuals. Over the years causes such as, the local branches of the Canadian Kidney Foundation, the Canadian Cancer Society and Brockville’s Making Play Possible, have all received support. This year funds are going to help pre-selected local families, dealing with autism, to purchase special needs items that will add to their children’s quality of life.

“There is something for everyone, all age groups, a real family oriented event.” enthuses Francois. “Bring a picnic lunch if you want or enjoy the fare from the food vendors. Don’t forget your Teddy Bear, and don’t forget a lawn chair. Because at the end of the day, this is the perfect spot to watch the Canada Day fireworks.” **LH**