

Street Celebration

TSN FEATURE STORY

On May 6th, nearly 60 CNL associates gathered for a Street Celebration. TSN followed the bus east on Central Ave. for the short drive to the Christian Service Center and photographed the sea of blue “Team-CNL” shirted volunteers as they exited the bus. Everyone seemed anxious to serve. Sunshine and music filled the air; it seemed that the bright colored balloons tied to the entrance gate danced a welcome as happy as those sent to greet us. “Right this way,” the coordinator said, and after a brief orientation, everyone quickly dispersed to their assigned stations.

We entered the campus past a long line already forming for cotton candy and snow cones. That’s strange, I thought, “I wonder why no one from our group volunteered for these stations?” As we continued past, I understood why... those poor cotton candy volunteers will be picking spun sugar out of their hair for weeks! “My group had obviously been here last year.” But I gotta give it up for the snow cone vols...their cones were off-the-midway! They poured syrup the color of rainbows onto small round mounds of ice so convincingly, I found myself looking for a pot of gold. And by golly, there it was... over there, next to the clown-lady, on her make-up table... and she was painting it onto the faces of little children -- designing masks that made them look feline, or Halloween scary, or like their favorite animal. This station was purrfect (forgive me) for the little ones, who showed their delight with giggles and squirms. A sketch artist was also on hand, drawing charcoal portraits on paper the color of grocery bags left out in the sun too long.

We followed the smoke signals to the BBQ grill on wheels, where the Maitland Men’s Club was flippin’ burgers and dogs and piling them high on tray after tray. “Come and get it,” they shouted. Time to get to work... so the group donned aprons and manned the serving line, or fished out cold drinks from the bottom of ice brimmed tubs, while other volunteers helped serve condiments and greet the more than 800 men, women and children who attend each year.

Started 10 years ago, the Annual Christian Service Center Street Celebration is a special event for those they serve each day. It started as a celebration of the serving of their 2,000,000th meal in 1998 and kicks off a series of weeklong activities. Medical and other community services are also made available. Executive Director and City Commissioner, Robert Stuart said, “CNL has over 60 volunteers here today, the most of any other business. And we’re grateful that you help us to support people in our community.”

After everyone had been served and finished their lunch, the clean-up crew (3rd shift CNL volunteers) was now arriving. The guests began to drift away after enjoying a sunny afternoon of fellowship and fun. The lone couple brave enough to dance bid each other adieu; and those few remaining gathered themselves around two tables watching the strike crew make short order of it all. My group of tired, but satisfied CNL volunteers headed for the street and the bus ride home. As we exited the campus, a shape at the corner of the gate caught my eye. From a distance, it looked like a small "Wookiee" from Star Wars. As I got closer, I realized it was someone's worldly possessions, cram-packed military-style into one very large backpack -- a stark reminder that not everyone can go "home" when the party's over.

Thanks to all the CNL volunteers for your warm heart and generous spirit.