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A spiritual, ecological celebration

by Teresa Malcolm



Isabella Smith and Harper Hays play as local band Weinland performs at St. Philip Neri Parish's Muddy Boot Organic Festival in Portland, Ore., Sept. 13. (Mark Stein)

PORTLAND, ORE. -- On Saturday night, the space in front of the stage had been packed, with big kids, little kids, grownups of all ages, dancing along to the big sound and outlandish, colorful spectacle of the March Fourth Marching Band, a popular local act that features dozens of musicians as well as dancers and stilt walkers.

The scene late Sunday afternoon was more sedate, but there was still dancing -- including little ones who ran about playing in the straw from the bales that provided seating up front, while adults relaxed, listening to the more folksy sounds of the day's musical lineup.

Nearby vendors were selling organic food, beer and wine. Booths sold environmentally friendly products while others provided information on sustainable living -- as did workshops being held in a former school building. Friday night had featured noted environmental author Bill McKibben as keynote speaker. Thousands of festival-goers were enjoying a weekend to celebrate and encourage living lightly on the earth -- the whole event an ambitious, lay-led project of one Catholic parish in southeast Portland.



The Muddy Boot Organic Festival, which held its fourth annual

event this Sept. 11-13, marks for St. Philip Neri Parish not only a means of evangelization, reaching out to the wider community in this heavily unchurched region, but also a transition in its own identity. Its longtime Italian-American membership is aging, while many of the younger parishioners stepping forward to take the lead bring not that ethnic identity, but a strong environmental consciousness.



It was Greg Martin, now 37, who was a parish council member when he proposed the idea of an organic festival in 2006.

"We were looking at creative ways to reach out to new communities," Martin said. And although many in Portland have no official religious affiliation, "there's definitely a sense of spirituality here. So our goal is to tap into that," he said, presenting "a connection between our faith, our spirituality, and living it day in and day out -- the choices we make, everything from the food we buy to the house we live in, to the earth we tend, to buy things local. It's really about God's creation."

Even before Muddy Boot was launched, St. Philip Neri had already taken steps toward promoting sustainability, inspired in part by the 2001 Columbia River pastoral letter issued by U.S. and Canadian bishops of the Pacific Northwest. One of the parish's major projects in response to that call was to create a bio-swale on the property -- a piece of land with native plants, designed to collect rainwater from the parking lot, instead of it running into storm drains, and filter out pollutants before it returns to the water table or to the Willamette River.

"There are a lot of young Portlanders who have this value of wanting to care for creation, and the Columbia River pastoral letter appeals to that group," said Dr. Debbie Murphy, 38, who serves as a medical volunteer at the festival ("mostly sunscreen and Band-Aids," she says). "The festival was born out of this idea."

Muddy Boot today is a big undertaking. Some 200 volunteers put in more than 1,000 hours total to bring it together, but even with all that work, it's easier today than that first year, organizers recall.



Martin said he made a point to reach out to all different groups in the parish

community, to ground it in the parish's mainstream. Among those was Dolly Lomax, also on the parish council in 2006, who needed some convincing.

"I thought they were all nuts!" she told *NCR*, laughing. With most of the other founding organizers in their 30s and early 40s, Lomax, 75 and a member of St. Philip Neri "since I was born," calls herself "the odd duck." Her first reaction, she said, was to ask, "Who's going to eat organically, for God's sake?"

They needed her on board, she said, "because I could get volunteers." And, as a leader of the Altar Society, she has provided them, a cadre of older women working the kitchen, keeping the food and drink going out.

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She and fellow organizer Matthew Ford, 36, recalled how she came into a meeting that first year demanding to know why she should pay \$5 for a pound of organic butter, when the mass-produced butter was only \$1.50. "We were having popcorn that first year," Lomax said. "I had to get organic butter, organic oil, organic popcorn."



"It took a little explaining," Ford said.

Selling it to the wider community, gathering sponsors and vendors for a new event was a different kind of challenge -- overcoming skepticism toward organized religion.

In this area of the country, said Jackie Yerby, 42, who has been a volunteer on the festival weekend since the beginning, there are still "a lot of filters toward people of faith" -- like the friend who said upon hearing that Yerby was Catholic, "I thought you were a smart person."

What made the difference for Muddy Boot was the keynote speaker they secured for that first year: Robert Kennedy Jr. "That was a shot in the arm," Martin said. "It legitimized the whole thing." It kicked off the first Muddy Boot with a standing-room-only event.

Still, Yerby says not enough people appreciate the level of the parish's involvement in the festival. "I've heard over the years people come and say, 'Oh my gosh, wow, the church is involved?'" Yeah, it's not

just in our parking lot," she said. "So for me, part of the participation is to represent my faith community and my faith tradition to the broader community."



Julie Gefroh attended with her family the first year, at the parish where she had been

confirmed and married -- but even though they lived in the neighborhood, they hadn't settled on a parish home. "But we went, and we were just totally blown away that my parish from growing up was putting on this amazing event."

It drew them back to St. Philip Neri as parishioners, and a few months later, Gefroh learned the festival's committee was looking to fill a part-time position organizing vendors and sponsors. She applied and was hired. By 2008, she was Muddy Boot's director as well, and the festival has grown.

That first year, Muddy Boot had 35 exhibitors and about 2,000 people showed up to attend. This year, there were some 80 exhibitors, and around 4,000 festival-goers, according to organizers.

The first year there was a \$5 suggested donation at the gate; that was changed to a \$5 admission. "We do ask that everybody chip in -- it helps us spread the cost of this quite expensive event," said Gefroh. One of the major expenses is the music: Muddy Boot is determined to get outstanding local acts.



The cost for sponsors and exhibitors is on a sliding scale, less for

small nonprofits than for large businesses. But not too large, and all local: "We're very discriminating as far as who's invited to participate," said Gefroh. "We get inquiries from groups all over the country, and we say no. It's a small, grass-roots community event. It's not a trade show. The message of spirituality and caring for the earth is central to the event, and we want it to be a community celebration; we don't want it to feel corporate in any way."

Bringing in about \$50,000 a year, Muddy Boot has met its goal of making enough of a profit to pay two part-time organizer positions and also to make a contribution to St. Philip Neri toward its earth



stewardship projects. (A recent change was an upgrade to a more

eco-friendly heating system; the next, still in the planning stage, is to install solar panels.)

For Catholics, the environmental cause “reaches right into our social justice roots,” Martin said. He and his wife, Jill, adopted a child from Ethiopia, and when they traveled there, he said, “you realize that’s the face of where sustainability matters the most” because they are the ones who will suffer the most from climate change. “They don’t have the economy or the money to rebound. Basically, we’re talking about life and death to these communities and people.”

Closer to home, “sustainability needs to be sustainably priced, especially in this economy,” he said. Buying organic is great for those who can afford it, but “the point is to make sustainability across the board, the norm.”

He added, “The heart and soul of what this is really about is the linkage of people across the world. As a Catholic, I couldn’t stand by and do nothing.”

St. Philip Neri is a Paulist parish, and when it comes to the order’s mission of evangelization, the Muddy Boot Festival “is probably the most Paulist thing we do,” said Fr. Michael Evernden, associate director of the Northwest Paulist Center. “It just invites people onto our property, to associate with us and by that association, hopefully something will happen.”

In the words of Fr. Gerard Tully, St. Philip Neri’s pastor, “When they come here and see what goes on, they begin to realize there are things here that resonate with them. It’s like, “Wow, you Catholics really believe this?” Yes, we do! We’re not all kneeling down praying rosaries the entire time. There really is a sense of, yes, we’re one with creation and we’re trying to be responsible stewards of it.”

Some festival-goers take the opportunity to talk to a priest. “Some of them can be very blunt, and some of them can be a little shy and hesitant, but you talk to them,” Tully said. On this Saturday, he struck up a conversation with a Baptist woman, who said she had never been in a Catholic church. So he invited her to attend the 4 p.m. Mass. “I noticed her during the liturgy,” Tully told *NCR* shortly after the Mass. “She was taking it all in, so I’m sure we’ll have an interesting conversation afterwards.”

Tully is relatively new to the parish, having just arrived for this assignment when the 2008 festival took place, but he has seen its effects over the past year: a couple of people in the RCIA who said they came to the church through Muddy Boot.



The parish has a booth at the festival staffed by Paulist lay

associates. Marc Duyck, 42, talked there with festival-goers, some stopping by who were fallen-away Catholics, new Catholics, or looking for a parish home. "Just listening to folks' stories, being open and sharing my passion about my faith -- that's a pretty effective way of witnessing as Christians," he said.

And the festival itself is a witness, too, he said: "This is where the church is a light, a beacon of hope for many folks that get very frustrated with the negativity of the church."

"It shows to the media a different side of the Catholic church than what they might get reading the popular media," Latham Stack, 55, told NCR as he flipped organic, local burgers at the festival.

Stack, who serves on the organizing committee, also notes how the family-oriented atmosphere distinguishes Muddy Boot from other local festivals -- not a lot of raucous drunkenness, despite the organic beer and wine for sale, and lots of activities for children. Kids can make toy cars out of vegetables and create their own puppets out of materials that might otherwise be landfill-bound. Later, in a professional show, puppet heroes foil a polluting villain, and sing, "You have everything you need to make the world a better place."

For the grownups, a workshop on local plans for reducing greenhouse gas emissions featured Portland Mayor Sam Adams. "Here was a chance then for local citizens to talk to him individually, asking questions one on one," said Stack. "Several people commented how exciting it was to be so close to the mayor."

Thanks to draws like that, Muddy Boot has made a splash in the surrounding neighborhood. Of the volunteer list of 200 names, Gefroh estimates about 100 are parishioners. "Then another 100 are people who have no affiliation at all who are just completely amazed by this event and they want to be a part of it."

"I don't know if the same formula would have worked somewhere else, but it worked just perfectly in this neighborhood," said Gefroh. "Plus, we've had people who've put their heart and soul into bringing the event together, and that comes through."

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Online resources

To listen to excerpts from Bill McKibben's Sept. 11 Muddy Boot keynote address, "The Most Important Number in the World," visit NCR podcasts at NCRonline.org.

St. Philip Neri Parish
www.stphilipneripdx.org

Muddy Boot Organic Festival
www.muddyboot.org

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