

## Juneteenth festival to focus on history of fete

By Tom Lochner  
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Saturday's Juneteenth Family Day in Richmond will highlight awareness, a theme that also goes to the heart of the holiday's origin.

On June 19, 1865, federal troops came to Eastern Texas to announce the Civil War was over and all the slaves were free, more than two years after then-President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, officially ending slavery in the United States.

"When news of freedom finally reached the 250,000 slaves along the coast of Texas ... families and friends celebrated with parades, festivals, parties and religious services," said Latressa Alford, an event volunteer.

Long regarded by many African-Americans in the South as their Independence Day, Juneteenth -- an amalgamation of "June" and "nineteenth" -- has been celebrated since the 1970s in Richmond. More than a generation earlier, tens of thousands of blacks from Texas and other parts of the South had migrated to the city looking for work in its shipyards and other World War II-related industries.

But over the years, many civic leaders have complained that the holiday has revolved around food and fun to the detriment of history and that many people, especially the young, have lost touch with what Juneteenth means.

"They don't know their history," said Joan Carpenter, an event volunteer. "If you don't know where you come from, how do you know where you're going?"

"When they had the first Juneteenth, they told people they were free; they could register to vote; they could make a change," Carpenter said. "This is what we need here, right now."

Saturday's event will have plenty of pageantry, but Carpenter promises more.

"It's going to be educational," she said. "It's not just to come and lay back and relax and have fun and eat barbecue."

There will be a parade along Macdonald Avenue to Nicholl Park, site of the main event. The grand marshal will be Jerrold Hatchett, founder of the National Brotherhood Alliance, a nonprofit organization that promotes youth leadership.

Featured artists are gospel singer Tonex; the Bay Area Blues Society's Caravan of All Stars; and Lenny Williams, the former lead singer for Tower of Power. Local acts will include the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts' jazz ensemble.

There will be motivational speakers, poetry recitals and a domino tournament. Doctors Medical Center in San Pablo will provide free screenings for diabetes and high blood pressure. Former Richmond resident and baseball great Willie McGee will host a youth baseball clinic.

The event will be financed by donations from businesses, foundations and individuals. Supporters include the city of Richmond, Rep. George Miller's office, where Alford is a district aide; County Supervisor John Gioia's office, where Carpenter is a district coordinator; and Assemblywoman Loni Hancock's office. San Pablo proclaimed Juneteenth "a celebration of freedom," among other agencies weighing in.

The educational component will include a speech about Juneteenth by a student and a "Wall of Firsts," with photos and brief biographies of African-American pioneers, including local ones who are active today, such as Richmond Mayor Irma Anderson and Contra Costa College President Helen Carr, recently named chancellor of the Contra Costa Community College District.

"We have doctors in this community; we have attorneys," Carpenter said. "Our youth need to know who these people are -- and that they have a chance to do the same thing."

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