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Black History Month Expo Draws Crowds



Pastor Benjamin Briggs leads a prayer prior to the start of the Feb. 25 "Peace and Unity Walk" that was part of the Black History Month Expo.

Black history is American history.

That was the theme of the 2017 Black History Month Expo and Peace and Unity Walk in Perris, a daylong event Feb. 25 that drew hundreds of people to Foss Field Park to learn about the contributions made by African Americans to the fabric of America.

Margaret Briggs, who served as master of ceremonies for the community's 23rd black-history celebration, said knowledge of history is empowering. She thanked the City for its support of the expo.

"It is important that we as African Americans are aware of our history and our contributions to this country—not just for us but for all people," she said.

Perris Mayor Michael Vargas, Mayor Pro Tem David Starr Rabb, City Councilman Malcolm Corona and City Councilwoman Rita Rogers represented the community's elected officials at the expo, which drew hundreds of visitors and large numbers of vendors.

"It's important for our youth to learn about black history," Vargas said. "There is so much history in Perris, history that has been made by all cultures. It is important for our community to become engaged and learn about our rich history."

Vargas pointed out that legendary actor Clarence Muse lived in the Perris Valley and earned a place in Hollywood history for his long and ground-breaking career. A bust of Muse recently was unveiled at the Perris community library. Other black icons celebrated included poet Maya Angelou, medical pioneer Charles Drew and slave-turned-orator Frederick Douglass.



Perris Mayor Michael Vargas holds a Certificate of Appreciation presented to him by Pastor Benjamin Briggs during the Feb. 25 Black History Month Expo.

Mayor Pro Tem David Starr Rabb said African Americans have contributed to American history "since we first arrived here in 1619" as slaves.

While the event celebrated culture and history, Rabb noted that civic leaders today are making significant strides in 2017 to improve the lives of residents. The City Council has worked hard to attract new retail and commercial businesses to Perris, and is reaping the benefits in the form of more stores and restaurants.

"Great things are happening in the City of Perris!" Rabb told the audience. "Keep the positivity going in Perris."



Margaret Briggs reads the Certificate of Appreciation presented to Perris Mayor Pro Tem David Starr Rabb during the Black History Month Expo.

Corona urged residents to educate themselves about the contributions of African-Americans to the nation's history and culture. He called the expo a "great event" that included musical performances and the presentations of awards to Perris school students.

Echoing comments of other City officials, Corona said every American should celebrate the contributions made by African Americans.

"African American history no longer belongs only to the African American community—it's everybody's history," he said. "It is important for us to celebrate the history and contributions of people who have gone on before us."

Rogers said that Perris is a community rich in many cultures and that the City has benefitted from that fabric of people.

"It's always wonderful to be at this event," Rogers said. "It is always very well attended and it's a very important time to remember the contributions of our African American community."



Perris City Councilwoman Rita Rogers accepts a Certificate of Appreciation from Margaret Briggs during the Black History Month Expo at Foss Field Park.

Walk for Peace and Unity

The day began with the 2nd annual "Peace and Unity Walk" from Mercado Park to City Hall. About 100 people—including ministers, students, school officials and residents—marched along D Street, some carrying banners, others holding orange, yellow and green balloons.

Pastor Benjamin Briggs, of the Greater Light Community Church, said the City of Perris remains free from civil strife because of the cooperation between residents, church and civic leaders and law enforcement officers.

Events like the Black History Month Expo unite the community and reduce the chance of discontent.

Briggs kicked off the walk with a prayer, urging people to respect others out of a sense of "compassion, caring and kindness."

"The City of Perris and the citizens of Perris are coming together for a peace and unity march," Briggs said, asking for divine assistance to "inspire and invigorate us as we march for peace, unity, harmony, love and strength."

Vince Ponce, superintendent of the Perris Elementary School District, called the unity march "a wonderful opportunity to show support for our City."

"Because we work through churches and faith-based groups and law enforcement avenues, we reach our residents and in doing so, unite the community," Ponce said.

Upon arriving at Foss Park, the peace and unity march walkers released their balloons into the air, creating a colorful display as the balloons ascended skyward.



The release of balloons during the City of Perris Black History Month Expo created a colorful pattern in the skies about Foss Field Park on the Perris City Hall Campus.

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