

Celebration draws political views

By Rene DeCair
Emerald Reporter

A burly middle-aged man stands under the banner of the Vietnam Veterans of America. Gene Huston, at a booth at the Eugene Celebration, is selling patriotic pins and bumper stickers. One sticker reads, "If You Burn My Flag, I'll Burn Your (picture of a donkey's hind end)."

On the stand in front of him lies an open book, full of posed pictures of men in uniform. He calls it his "War Yearbook."

"How have you been?" he asks another vet in his middle years as he saunters up to the booth. Glad to see each other, they laugh heartily and give each other a few hefty slaps on the back.

Huston, former president of Vietnam Veterans of America,

has a purpose: he wants to provide information and support for other vets. Huston said he wants "to let them (veterans) know I understand. I was there."

"We call this outreach," he said.

While Huston attempted to reach out to veterans, dozens of people with other causes used the eighth annual Eugene Celebration as a soapbox. With estimated attendance from Friday through Sunday at 100,000 to 150,000 people, the celebration was the place to be for anyone wishing to get a message out.

Eighty-seven community groups with causes and a few political candidates worked booths to express views and gear up for the Nov. 6 elections.

Eugene Celebration marketing specialist Andrea Vollmer

said the original inspiration for the celebration came from the desire to bring together the diverse people in the community.

The city council wanted to have a place where members of the community "weren't pitted against each other in any political way and everybody had their spot here," she said.

That original vision held true as the celebration hosted such diverse groups as the Hemlock Society, Friends of Downtown, Oregon Rivers Council and the National Organization for Women.

Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., performed his annual duty of slug slime scooper in Saturday's parade. Democratic gubernatorial candidate Barbara Roberts rode in the parade, and both she and her Republican contender Dave Frohnmayer gave away buttons and stickers at their booths.

Although some had the glamour of wooing voters and scooping slug slime, others were content to do the mundane jobs of passing out pamphlets and buttons.

"This is what you have to do. This is the nuts and bolts of politics," said George Alvergue, as he worked at Sen. Mark Hatfield's campaign booth.

As for diversity, groups concerned with the timber issue covered both ends of the political spectrum.

Mike McKay, chairman of the steering committee for the Yellow Ribbon Coalition, said the coalition set up a booth, "to get (the public) to realize there are other answers (to the timber supply problem) than shutting the timber industry down."

Meanwhile, Bill Todd, of the Forest Conservation Council, said he was there to "show people how fragmented the national forests are getting."

Todd believes the celebration's diversity pays off. "That's the best type of education because you're getting both sides," Todd said.

But not everyone was convinced of the usefulness of the booths.

"I think people come here more for the food and entertainment — not the politics," said Scott Fast, who was there just for the fun of it.

Regardless of public opinion, those managing booths viewed their role as educational and felt that the celebration was a good place to get their messages out.

"This is the celebration of the arts and caring expressions here locally," said John Meiser, volunteer at the Eugene Peaceworks booth. "This is the place to be."



Photo by Sean Poston

Another celebration participant, John Meiser, volunteers his time selling buttons and providing information at the Eugene Peaceworks booth.

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