

A FAIR SHAKEDOWN ON SECURITY

How OCF Keeps the
Peace During the Weekend
BY PATRICK NEWSON

When tens of thousands of people gather in a field over the course of this long weekend in July and continue to circumnavigate the infinity loop known to Oregon Country Fair-goers as “the Eight,” the potential for danger or volatility is like that of any small city.

Although few incidents occur each year, both on and around the event site, Fair staff and their external partners work hard to ensure the safety and security of attendees, vendors, performers and all those whose path leads to the intentional community that annually arises outside of Veneta.

Two weeks before Fair, I drove out to the Fairgrounds to meet with some of the back-up managers (BUMs), a group of long-time volunteers who oversee operation and security.

During the weeks of construction and preparation leading up to Fair, there is still a strong awareness of who all is onsite. Even though I squirreled through a different gate than I was supposed to (away from the primary checkpoint), I was met upon entry by security. They had me wait until a radio report would confirm my expected presence before being escorted first to park in the empty haybale laden lot.

Then, in the back of an off-road vehicle, I was taken to the admissions gate at Dragon Plaza where I was supposed to be. I had gotten off my path.

Each OCF volunteer is required to take part in a course led by BUM Zak Schwartz, a local psychologist who specializes in what he calls Human Intervention Training. The system promotes empathy instead of sympathy, which is the guiding principle behind the OCF system of self-regulation if a crisis surfaces.

Schwartz and other BUMs refer to “three-chip” interactions, the criteria for successful negotiation. First, take care of business. Second, treat everybody with love and respect. Third, have fun.

“These are the concepts and skills that add to the communal feeling,” Schwartz says.

Each crew member is expected to follow these guidelines in the event of a situation. Most of the guidelines stem from vulnerability, “somebody who is hurt, or threatened or feels disrespected,” he adds.

“Moods are contagious,” Schwartz continues, and 99 percent of issues are resolved easily. This is training to mediate disputes and negotiate mutually acceptable resolutions, Schwartz explained. “This is crucial for our psychospiritual rejuvenation together.”

When I spoke to two BUMs at Dragon Plaza, one who goes by the call sign “Cotterpin,” they broke down the basic organizational structure for implementing internal safety and security. A variety of crews operate semi-autonomously. The parking lot crew, for example, meets and greets each attendee and checks their credentials.

Each crew has a coordinator and a shift supervisor, and all are connected via radio. Fair Central is the communications hub that serves as emergency dispatch. These BUMs tell me

part of the training is to “know when to ask for help.”

When necessary, help arrives in the form of the “Big Boys,” a roving rapid-response team. This group of longtime volunteers is trained extensively in de-escalation and conflict resolution, and must go through a five-year process of vetting before joining the team.

When the “Big Boys” are dispatched, they engage with the intention of “deeper conversation and advanced understanding for people in crisis.”

Typically, according to the BUMs, this sort of crisis surrounds people who aren’t where they are supposed to be.

“Everybody is on a different path at the Fair,” Cotterpin says, adding that sometimes people think the party is in one place, but it’s right behind them and they can’t see it yet. “They haven’t found the right path for where they need to go versus where they think they should be.”

Often this occurs at night, while Fair is closed to the public and the only people allowed on site are credentialed staff, vendors, performers and significant others.

Once Fair closes, the sweep begins. “Everybody joins hands and goes through the entire event and camping site checking everybody’s wristbands,” Schwartz says.

In addition, several checkpoints are set up at random spots around the Eight and at the



PHOTO BY RICK SOUTHER

access points for designated camping. During this time, anybody who isn’t supposed to be there is asked to leave, and occasionally presented with a written document that explains the consequences of noncompliance.

“All we ever charge is trespass,” Schwartz says, “and not very often.”

In the case of dangerous, violent or criminal activity, however, external security is also present.

“We have resources in place, ready and prepared for an emergency,” Cotterpin says, and many of the BUMs are mandatory reporters.

OCF pays for increased patrols at and around the gate, according to Sgt. Carrie Carver of the Lane County Sheriff’s Office. In addition, grant money from the Oregon State Sheriff’s Association and the Oregon Department of Transportation helps fund increased patrols with a focus on traffic safety.

The lion’s share of citations issued during the 2016 and 2017 Country Fair weekends were moving violations, seatbelt violations or speeding tickets.

“Overall, the Fair family does a good job working closely with increased police presence,” Sgt. Carver says.

The BUMs agree that it’s a positive relationship and applaud the work of external security in keeping fairgoers safe.

“It is amazing that so many people are so on board,” Cotterpin says. “The goal here is to be safe for everybody that comes to the Country Fair.”

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